



7-1-2010

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Recommended Citation

Grahn, J. (2010). Grahn, J. (2010). Ecology of the erotic in a myth of Inanna. *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, 29(2), 58–67.. *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, 29 (2). <http://dx.doi.org/10.24972/ijts.2010.29.2.58>



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Ecology of the Erotic in a Myth of Inanna

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Myths of Mesopotamian Goddess Inanna, planet Venus in the ancient Sumerian pantheon, have been useful in psychological processes of contemporary women. A lesser-known myth, “Inanna and Shukaletuda,” includes sexual transgression against the deity and ties the deified erotic feminine with fecundity and sacredness of fields and trees. Interpretation of Inanna’s love poems and poems of nature’s justice contextualizes ecofeminist relevance to psychological issues. Deconstruction of rich imagery illustrates menstrual power as female authority, erotic as a female aesthetic bringing order, and transgender as sacred office of transformation. Meador’s (2000) interpretation of three Inanna poems by a high priestess of ancient Ur provides four new archetypes for women that situate an axis for further understanding of “Inanna and Shukaletuda.”

Keywords: *ecofeminism, Inanna, archetype, erotic, menstruation, rape, mythology, transgender, embodied spirituality, Sumerian, ecology, spirituality.*

Without question, the literature of the goddess Inanna of ancient Sumer has been valuable in the teaching of both transpersonal psychology and spirituality to contemporary women, and men. The Mesopotamian poets of the second millennium BCE were not only the first to capture in lasting written form their people’s sacred stories, but they also left much material that is remarkably accessible and applicable to our current world.

We have benefitted as section after section of the lyrical poetry and myths of the Sumerian goddess Inanna has been excavated, translated, and published. Such psychologically relevant treasures as Inanna Meets the God of Wisdom (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983), and The Descent of Inanna into the Underworld (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983; Meador, 1992) enable both women and men to delve deeply into their own psyches, and, for example, to understand some forms of depression as possibly creative journeys that not only achieve resolution, but are also beneficial. Earlier in the 20th century the surfacing of the Gilgamesh myth with its flood story, and Inanna’s courtship tale of choosing the shepherd’s gifts over the farmer’s, brought attention to the antiquity of stories that later became retained in biblical texts, long after the great Sumerian civilization had faded. By the first millennium BCE, if not earlier, Inanna’s name had become replaced by her more recent and familiar names of Ishtar and Astarte. Meador’s (2000) interpretations

of translations of the long poems and temple hymns of Enheduanna, the great poet-priestess of Ur, have contributed to the knowledge of Inanna as a vehicle for a pro-nature philosophy that is pressingly needed in current times. Psychologists, activists, and artists have used the mythology to further contemporary methods and worldviews (Grahn, 1993, 1999; Meador, 1993, 2000; Perera, 1981; Starhawk, 1988; Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983). Some examples: Inanna’s Descent to the Underworld has been used to re-describe depression as a creative journey endowing “the eye of truth” as its outcome. Inanna attains laws of the cosmos in the myth, Inanna Meets the God of Wisdom, a story that helps teach women that power is paradoxical, belongs to them, and involves struggle. And, Inanna’s richly sensual love poetry attaches sexuality to the sacred in ways seldom seen in other literature. Now, interpreting yet another and less known myth, Inanna and Šu-kale-tuda, about Inanna seeking justice for a sexual transgression of her body, I would like to suggest that once again her fine Sumerian poets can teach us something of her contemporary as well as ancient, psychological and ecofeminist value. The myth does not, and I do not, use the term “rape,” something I will discuss at length later.

As a mythologized personification of the planet Venus, among other natural features, Inanna was queen of the night sky where she flared as a living torch, and she ruled the day as well, coming down to walk about

in human form among her people, the “black-headed” (as they called themselves) of the Mesopotamian river valley (Simo Parpola, as cited in Meador, 2000, pp. 17-18; Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983). As long ago as six thousand years, temples were built to her, and her signs were left stamped in baked clay and on carved seals. The earliest cuneiform tablets were found at her temple site at Kulaba, the place that would become “old town” as the great city of Uruk grew (Schmandt-Besserat, 1992).

Fifty-five hundred years ago, the clay tablet lists and accountings of Sumerian scribes began to yield a new art, written literature (Schmandt-Besserat, 1992). Much was written in praise of powerful Sumerian gods who preceded Inanna in the lineage of the pantheon, the sky god An, the wind god Enlil, the stony earth goddess Ninhursaga, the moon couple Nanna and Ningal (Inanna’s parents), and the god of wisdom and sweet water, Enki, her grandfather. But by about 2300 BCE, Inanna’s own literature would exalt her to the highest position in the complex pantheon of Sumerian deities (Jacobsen 1978; Meador, 2000; Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983).

As a prototype of active female power, Inanna’s range is unique, her love poetry some of the most lushly sensuous ever written, her combination of authority and emotional intelligence unparalleled among the other Sumerian deities (Black, Cunningham, Robson, & Zólyomi, 2004; Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983). “Lady of largest heart” one of her poets called her (Meador, 2000, p. xxx). She is a protective warrior in that “fighting is her play” (p. 118), yet she also tenderly kisses babies and cares for her Sumerian people in their complex economic lives as they balanced both urban and rural activities. She is a complex, paradoxical goddess of both nature and culture.

Dated from the late third millennium BCE, the extensive poetry of high priestess Enheduanna so expanded the character of the goddess Inanna that Jungian analyst and writer Meador (2000) deciphered from its stirring lines four new archetypes for women: lover, priestess, warrior, and androgyne. While warrior is one aspect of this complex deity, another is her far-ranging rule of her people, after she receives the paradoxical cosmic powers of tenderness and care, drought and flood, wealth and ruin, health and illness (Meador, 2000), and of all things related to the people’s occupations of metal, wood, and stone crafts, trading, herding, and horticulture (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983). Yet another aspect of her

character is her sexuality, expressed in fine love poetry, in which she chooses among suitors, celebrates her own vulva, and spells out in detail how her lover is to approach her (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983; Jacobsen, 1987).

Inanna, though merged with the planet Venus as her identity, takes other forms in the imagery of her poets: torch, dragon, snake, lion, bird; she also creates permeable boundaries of gender for her people. She is sometimes titled “the Woman” as though she represents a collectivity of Sumerian womankind, with the same physical body and experiences. She is very much an elaborate social construct of both Sumerian culture and nature. Meador (2000) summarized something of her meaning:

On the cosmic level, Inanna pulls the rug out from under our belief in order and principle. She is the element of chaos that hangs over every situation, the reminder that cultures and rules and traditions and order are constructs of humanity. Society congeals possibility into laws and mores so that we can live together. Inanna reminds us these are but products of the mind. At bottom all is possible. (p. 11)

As this is a myth of ecofeminism, the four qualities I am tracking through this article all have to do with the power of women’s bodies magnified as powers of nature, and embodied in Inanna’s mythology: Inanna’s sexuality as eros that feeds the Land; her capacity to stop the people’s economic life with the power of her menses; her ability to deprive her transgressor of rebirth; and her control of gender androgyny that implies transformation of relationship or situation. A valuable correspondence to these powers is provided by Meador’s (2000) articulation of the four archetypes, as named above.

Note that the translators of this myth spell the goddess’ name with one “n”; I am following the usual spelling of “Inanna” except in quotes from the text, but also capitalizing “Land” as do they.

The Myth:

Inanna and Šu-kale-tuda

The myth tells of a confrontation between the goddess and a young man, a callow youth, Šu-kale-tuda. The story begins by extolling Inanna’s righteous authority, as she stands in her temple, which was called E-ana, and how she set out one day on a quest for justice:

The mistress who, having all the great divine powers, deserves the throne dais; Inana who stands in E-ana

as a source of wonder—once, the young woman went up into the mountains, holy Inana went up into the mountains. To detect falsehood and justice, to inspect the Land closely, to identify the criminal against the just, she went up into the mountains. (Black et al., 2004, p. 197)

The scene then shifts to Enki, god of wisdom and sweet (fresh) waters, who is teaching a raven the arts of gardening. The raven closely follows the instructions of the wisdom god; he chews up the kohl plant, he pulls up a shoot that is a palm tree and plants it; he even properly works the shadouf, the long thin pole with a counter weight that makes the water bucket rise up and down drawing priceless liquid from the river (Black et al., 2004).

Meanwhile on her mission of inspection, goddess Inanna went into the mountains and began flying around. From one border of the territory to the other, she flew round and round. She flew around the Tree whose roots intertwine with the horizon of heaven, by now so tired that she lay down beside its boundary roots. She had for her loincloth a weaving of the seven cosmic powers, across her thighs. Her thoughts were with her shepherd lover, Dumuzid. On the same plot of land a youth, Šu-kale-tuda, was working, and saw her; he approached, untied the loincloth of divine powers across her holy vulva. He had intercourse with her as she slept, kissed her, and returned to his place at the edge of the garden plot. By the light of the risen sun, “the woman inspected herself closely, holy Inana inspected herself closely” (Black, Cunningham, Fluckiger-Hawker, Robson, & Zólyomi, 1998-2001a, para. 112-128).

She was immediately outraged, asking, “what should be done” (Black et al., 1998-2001a, para. 129-138) on account of her vulva? Specifically, “what should be destroyed” (para. 129-138) because of her vulva? She instantly acts. First, she fills all the water wells of the Land with her own blood, so that blood is irrigating the orchard crops, and they are producing blood. The adult slave who goes out to gather firewood is drinking blood; the girl slave who is drawing water from the well is drawing up blood. All the Sumerian people are drinking blood. The people are asking, how long will this last? “No one knew when this would end” (para. 129-138). Inanna declared that she would search all through the Lands for the man who had done this. She began to search, taking with her an entourage of assistants:

She mounted on a cloud, took (?) her seat there... The south wind and a fearsome storm flood went before her. The pilipili (one of the [temple] personnel in Inanna’s entourage) and a dust storm followed her... Seven times seven helpers (?) stood beside her in the high desert. (para. 185-193)

She searched everywhere, but she could not find the man who had had intercourse with her.

Šu-kale-tuda went to see his father, and told him some of the story, that he was worried as the woman had vowed to find him. His father told him to go into the city and hide among the other black-headed youth. Once again Inanna flooded the Sumerian water supply with her own blood, and once again she went looking for the man who had had intercourse with her. Again, she could not find him. Again, the boy went in fear to his father, and was given the same advice. Yet a third time she went looking for him, taking another offensive measure. She took an implement in her hand and blocked off all the roads; no one in the Land could now travel. And still, she could not find him.

Now, Inanna went to the elder wisdom god, Enki, who had been helpful to her in other of her life events. Enki was in charge of the elemental creation place, the apsu (watery abyss from which reality arises). “Who will compensate me?” (Black et al., 1998-2001a, para. 239-255) for this, Inanna asked him. “I shall only re-enter my shrine E-ana satisfied after you have handed over that man to me,” (para. 239-255), she declared. Enki, whose province was provision of fresh water in the Land, responded, “All right!... [and]... So be it!” (para. 239-255). He opened the apsu; immediately Šu-kale-tuda had no place to hide. He went running into the mountains. There, Inanna arched her body across the sky in the form of a rainbow, from one end of the Land to the other. And, although in his frightened and solitary situation he made himself very small, she saw him.

She questioned him, and while the text is unclear here, it seems she compared his behavior to that of a dog, a donkey, and a pig. Addressing her as “my lady” (Black et al., 1998-2001a, para. 262-281), he told his complete story to holy Inanna. He explained that his job was to water the garden plots and build an installation that would be a watering well for the plants, “but not a single plant remained there, not even one, I had pulled them all out by their roots and destroyed them” (para. 262-281). Then, a stormwind from the mountains blew

dust into his eyes; he could not wipe it all out; he had sand in his eyes. He looked and saw the exalted gods of the plains and of the mountains, the wind and the sky. And then he saw flying toward him a single god, “I saw someone who possesses fully the divine powers” (para. 262-281). He saw her divinity. In the middle of the plot stood the Tree whose roots entangle with the horizon, a Euphrates poplar, so large its shade remains the same all through the day. Under this tree the lady had laid down to rest after she had flown around heaven and around earth, from Elam to Subir, and she was very tired. He noticed her; he approached, had intercourse with her, and kissed her. Afterwards, he went back to the edge of his plot. Having heard his testimony, she then “determined his destiny” (para. 290-310). Holy Inanna said to Šu-kale-tuda: “So! You shall die! What is that to me?” (para. 290-310).

But his name, she continued, would be remembered; his name would “exist in songs and make the songs sweet” (Black et al., 1998-2001a, para. 290-310). The songs would be pleasingly sung in the palace of the king; shepherds would sing them in their work of churning butter, and in the meadow where they grazed their sheep. As for Šu-kale-tuda himself, “the palace of the desert shall be your home” (para. 290-310). Such was his destiny. The myth ends with praise to holy Inanna, who decides fates.

An Interpretation with an Ecofeminist Perspective

What is that blood? This myth has elements that are mysterious—at first reading. What is this about her blood? Why are the cosmic powers in a loincloth across her thighs? Why doesn't the myth tell us his motivation? And why, if she has the power to declare the criminal's death as her retribution, does she then say that his name will be remembered, sweetly sung even in the king's palace? And what, exactly, was his transgression, given that she is a divine shape-shifter and he a mortal callow youth? The myth doesn't call it a rape; should we?

An appropriate place to search for answers is Inanna's favorite site: her sexuality. The seven cosmic powers—in some myths she wears them in her cloak, however in this myth the image is of a girdle or loincloth with the powers woven into it, that lies protectively and provocatively across her vulva, drawing a connection between the cosmic laws and her place of eros. What is it about her vulva that has anything to do with the

correct functioning of the cosmos? The myth shows this in the series of actions of the criminal.

As learned from his confession to the goddess, prior to approaching her, the young gardener was really no gardener, he had already transgressed the Land—he was to make a well for the garden plot but as he complains, there were no plants to water, for he had pulled them all up. He was a criminal of a person already. Though recognizing her as divine, he disrespected her need for rest and also the sacred place, the tree she had chosen, where the roots of the horizon entangle, a Tree of Life as it were, under which she lay sleeping. A Euphrates poplar, a huge, long-lived, spreading, riverbank tree, turns brilliantly golden in Fall—Inanna's gold color of the planet Venus shining in the evening sky. That this tree is explicitly named, described as having its roots tangled at the place “intertwined [at the] horizon of heaven,” (Black et al., 1998-2001a, para. 112-128) and is visited by a goddess, designates it a “Tree of Life” (Haynes, 2009, p. 68), and therefore a sacred site. When the water of the Euphrates is still, a mirror image of the tree reflects in such a way that the river bank looks like an island floating between two blue seas, the Land held together by the roots of both trees—the one real, the other reflected and imagined. And then, at that sacred site, before he committed his sexual transgression on the body of the goddess, he first disrespected the seven powers of her girdle, pulling them aside. Finally, he sneaks upon her as she sleeps, and obviously, leaves her will out of his act, which is for himself alone.

By knitting the imagery together, the poet ties together the two transgressions, sexual and ecological—a man who would carelessly transgress the Land would carelessly transgress the person of the Woman as well. The belt across Inanna's loins contains the laws or orders of nature; the implication is that her vulva holds things together for the world of Sumer. Besides her identity as nature itself, how does her vulva hold things together? For one thing, her benevolent sexuality, which is fulsome in her literature, manifests her vivacious force of eros, aesthetic sexuality that gives abundance to the people. But her first action after inspecting her vulva and realizing she has been transgressed is to reverse her vulva's benevolent power, spewing venomous, show-stopping blood instead.

That she filled all the wells of the Land with her own blood is the clue that this is a major transformation with a menstrual component. In her guise as a maiden

lying under a tree, Inanna produces blood as her first act of correcting the sexual transgression—signifying that the gardener has broken a nearly universal menstrual taboo that prohibits sexual intercourse (and another that prohibits economic activity) while the woman is bleeding (Grahn, 1993, 1999; Jacobsen, 1987). She sends a signal that his act is on the order such that the blood law of the Goddess has been transgressed, and consequently all the Land is brought to a startled halt by the substance, which she deliberately pours into the water sources.

This is a deity for whom menstruation, sexuality, and other functions of her vulva are at the heart of her sacrality (Meador, 1992; Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983). This surely explains why the laws of the cosmos are woven into a holy loincloth that binds her loins. One of her other names, Ishtar, contains the syllables indicating menses (Meador, 2000, p. 56). The inner sanctum of her temple, the giparu, is the women's secluded section. The Sumerians were people who celebrated Inanna at the new moon by holding a parade for her, and who reveled in sacred blood: they sprinkled drops of blood when they walked in procession to her, and they poured the red liquid of blood onto the dais where she would stand, or seat herself (Black et al., 1998-2001a; Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983). So now this blood of her outrage that she floods into the wells has brought local life to a standstill. She has taken away the water of life from her horticultural people. When will this end, they ask.

A second indication that menstrual taboo is being invoked in the poem occurs the third time she could not find Šu-kale-tuda, though she looked over all the territory. She then blocked all the roads, so the people were prevented from traveling. Once again we sense we are in menstrual taboo territory, suggesting that this refers to a prohibition against traveling (a restriction which could apply to the men in the family as well as to the women) whenever the women are in their bleeding rituals (Grahn, 1999). The goddess is in her stormy period, she has changed all the water in the land to her own blood, and now no one is to travel. No one is to work. No one puts lips to the water from the wells. With her paradoxical and elemental feminine powers, she has altered her usual bounty to a state of suspended tension that impacts all economic and social activity.

All this because a puny gardener lifted her skirt? Through my reading I had the uneasy feeling that rape is not an appropriate term of description here. Uneasy

because does one dare let go of the protective properties of using this term, even for a moment's reflection? Rape has undergone a change of definition within my lifetime. The patriarchal view of rape is that it is a transgression of one male upon the property of another male, to the shame of the female, who may be blamed and punished rather than the perpetrator. A feminist view of rape is that it is an act of aggression against her (or him if the victim is a male) person, with grave psychological and perhaps social consequences to the victim; it may lead to pregnancy, disease, social stigma and punishment, post-traumatic stress disorder, and an inner sense of shame that may last a lifetime. The victim is an individual with personal rights; the rapist is seen as having great powers of destruction.

But in this myth from the era of still potent goddesses, on the cusp of the patriarchy with its emphasis on kingship, militarism, slavery, and empire, Inanna is still an active, paradoxical, and extremely powerful Feminine Principle. She is nature as a living participant and culture as a protective agent. In this myth, as I interpret it, the crime is against a goddess who embodies simultaneously woman, society, and nature. The transgression against her vulva is hardly describable as rape in our modern sense given that Inanna's quest for justice has such an expanded, complex implication in this story. This myth takes rape out of the realm of the personal, and extends the transgression to that which impacts all society and how society intersects with nature.

Inanna sets out consciously "to identify the criminal against the just" (Black et al., 1998-2001a, para. 1-10). The goddess is outraged, but she is not psychologically damaged. She does not complain of personal pain, or nurse her wounds. She does not flee or hide out; she is very public. Shame does not enter in. She is the one who does damage in order to locate the culprit. Her blood is her first force of expression. She brings economic activity to a standstill; she effectively shuts the water wells; she blocks off the roads; and she tells the god Enki, her ally in other myths as well as in this one, that she will not sit down again on her throne until he hands over to her the culprit. She will not stop her restless and counter-productive activity. He immediately agrees to her terms, and to reveal the culprit he opens the apsu—the place of origination—and again there is an implication of transformation, starting over from the beginning, re-orienting.

Inanna's Sexuality Is Life Force

Inanna is most commonly understood as a goddess of love, including sexual love. Her poets celebrated this about her, from what has been recovered, more than any of her many attributes. For Inanna sex is openly enjoyed, a public and holy joy. In the oldest part of her city, Uruk, is her original precinct, Kulaba, of which a Sumerian poet wrote, "Inanna the mistress, the lady of the great powers who allows sexual intercourse in the open squares of Kulaba" (Black, Cunningham, Fluckiger-Hawker, Robson, & Zólyomi, 1998-2001b, para. 358-367).

For Inanna sex is joyful lovemaking, with elaborate rites that precede and accompany the intercourse itself. First she prepares her holy body; she bathes and adorns herself; she paints her eyes; her bed is made up especially for the sexual encounter with her lover. Cedar and other sweet smelling balms are spread among the sheets. She describes her preparations:

When I have bathed for the king, for the lord, when I have bathed for the shepherd, Dumuzid, when I have adorned my flanks (?) with ointment (?), when I have anointed my mouth with balsamic oil (?), when I have painted my eyes with kohl... (Black, Cunningham, Fluckiger-Hawker, Robson, & Zólyomi, 1998-2001c, para. 14-35)

The lover is called holy, and spouse; she calls him "My honey-man" (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p. 38). He too meticulously prepares himself and approaches her in the appointed place, not just anywhere. The time and the place are under her specification; the acts are regulated. His behavior includes play that is foreplay, carefully spelled out by the poets, "when he ruffles my pubic hair for me, when he plays with the hair of my head, when he lays his hands on my holy genitals" (Black et al., 1998-2001c, para. 14-35). Her pleasure is part of the act, and part of the truth between them, "when he treats me tenderly on the bed, then I too will treat my lord tenderly" (para. 14-35). The texts about Inanna's sexuality imply that her sexuality is for the benefit of everyone, and the words also seem to be instructions to the populace from the priestesses and priests, of how lovemaking should proceed through the aesthetics of beauty and tenderness, in order to induce the maximum joy.

Inanna is the one holding the power position: her lover must treat her tenderly, then she will treat him

tenderly. But he must prove himself. Her genitals are holy, they must be approached in a holy manner. For Inanna the sex act itself is so much about the upwelling of joy that the high sexual arousal and orgasmic climax is called rejoicing:

After the lady has made him rejoice with her holy thighs on the bed, after holy Inanna has made him rejoice with her holy thighs on the bed, she relaxes (?) with him on her bed: "Iddin-Dagan, you are indeed my beloved!" (Black, Cunningham, Fluckiger-Hawker, Robson, & Zólyomi, 1998-2001d, para. 187-194)

As though her attractiveness and sexuality keep the whole economy reciprocal, Inanna's lovers must bring her, through her temple personnel, offerings in their courtship: Dumuzid, her favorite, brings the best milk and cheese; the farmer brings cakes and wine; the fowler brings the finest birds; the fisherman brings her his catch (Black, Cunningham, Fluckiger-Hawker, Robson, & Zólyomi, 1998-2001e).

Inanna is the unpredictable tumult of nature's cycles, and she is also the cultivated Land and its abundance: "Oh mistress, let your breasts be your fields! Inana, let your breasts be your fields, your wide fields which pour down flax, your wide fields which pour forth grain" (Black, Cunningham, Fluckiger-Hawker, Robson, & Zólyomi, 1998-2005, para. 70-77). The priests ask the goddess to flow forth water from her breasts, and they give her a libation in exchange.

For Inanna, sexuality is joy that leads to abundance and wellbeing, and therefore it is part of celebrative public ritual. The solitary nighttime act of the gardener is thus an act of his personal will exerted on her body as an isolated psychological release, not a ritual or sacred act, having no relation to the formal rites of erotic arousal, love, and tenderness that her temple poets so carefully prescribe. The errant youth could not think much of himself, as he has already wrecked the meaning of his own task to provide water to nurture seedlings by inexplicably pulling up all the plants by the roots and killing them. As with those mindless acts, his transgression on the body of the sleeping goddess is a stupid crime of opportunity, done impulsively. He is a creature driven by irrationality, inability to control his impulses. The story calls him a "boy" (Black et al., 1998-2001a, para. 139-159). He knows he is in trouble for what he has done, and goes to his father for advice;

his father tells him only to go to the city to be among the other black-headed young men “who are your brothers” (para. 177-184) so she cannot find him.

Inanna solves this crime, though not by herself. Inanna is an integral part of the Sumerian pantheon in which none of the gods is hegemonic; together they constitute a powerful community. Though some of her powers and attributes will later contribute to Yahweh’s characteristics, unlike his more separated portrayal, she is immanent in nature, she flies around in the form of a hawk as she circles the earth; she rides a cloud, becomes a rainbow; she is the planet Venus on its courses. She is intricately involved with the other gods, who are also elements of nature, and she is a child of the moon couple with their cycles.

The Eyes of Life, Death, and Rebirth

The role of priestess is to create rituals of transformation, and with the goddess acting as priestess, these would be amplified. Within the religion of Inanna, as seen through her mythology, at least some of the Sumerians would have believed in cycles of rebirth. The theme of life, death, and rebirth in the myth, The Descent of Inanna into the Underworld, belonged both to Inanna and to the queen of the netherworld—Ereshkigal, who is Inanna’s elder sister. She is the agent of Inanna’s three days of death, and she also gave her over to the forces of resurrection. That the underworld is a place of rebirth is reinforced by the characterization of Ereshkigal’s daughter Nungal as the midwife of life and death. The midwife’s temple dais was set up at the edge of the netherworld, just as the human midwife is stationed at the gateway to the womb. Nungal speaks for herself: “My own mother... has allotted to me her divine powers” (Black et al., 2004, p. 341). Among these powers, in addition to cutting the umbilical cord and speaking benevolent destinies, Nungal has the power of judgment over who among the people shall live and who shall die. Ereshkigal’s role makes it clear that she has the power of restoring life to at least some who have died; Dumuzid and his sister, for instance, die and are reborn every six months, respectively (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983). Inanna acquires from her underworld death and rebirth the Eye of Death to balance her eye of life, and therefore she has this power as well. Though some writers have interpreted the two powerful sisters as enemies, I see them as a family: Inanna, her sister Ereshkigal, and Nungal, Inanna’s niece, who is the joy of her heart.

For us, Inanna’s journey through her elder

sister’s fierce domain models life, death, and rebirth as a psychological passage, whatever else it might have meant for the Sumerians. She did not go through this transformation alone; she received shamanic assistance and the agency of the god Enki, who in the genealogy of Sumerian gods is her maternal grandfather (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983). As the quintessential fertile male principle, Enki is sweet water, and semen, and the construction of irrigation systems so crucial to these alluvial plain river horticulturalists, craftspeople, and herders. Enki is part of the creation cycle, and he affects Inanna’s return from the Underworld.

Now, in this story of the gardener’s criminal transgression on the body of the goddess of love, Enki is again the source of a solution for her. When Inanna cannot find the man who had intercourse with her, not even after flooding the water with blood twice, and trying thrice to find him, she turns to Enki. She supplicates, but she also threatens, and he capitulates. Šu-kale-tuda’s misuse of the goddess begins with misuse of the plants of the Land, then of the Tree of Life, then of the cloth with cosmic powers, then her holy vulva. Finally, he kisses her. In Sumer, this might have had a particularly transgressive quality, as the kiss was perhaps more than a sign of affection or a method of sexual arousal: one Sumerian poem suggests that the kiss on the lips was part of a troth, a promise of loyalty in love, and acknowledgment of Inanna as a fruiting tree, a garden (Jacobsen, 1987, p. 98). Inanna, hearing the youth’s confession, compares his behavior to that of animals who do no courtship rituals: dog, donkey, pig. From the text, Enki had taught even a raven to plant and irrigate, two things this failure of a gardener cannot manage to do.

Inanna’s punishment is swift and terrible; she decides Šu-kale-tuda’s destiny—that he will have no destiny. The first thing she does is to take away from him not only his life but perhaps more importantly, the goddess’ gift of rebirth. “So! You shall die!” (Black et al., 1998-2001a, para. 290-310) she says. The “So” rings out with its meanings: therefore, consequently, because of your actions, or perhaps meant more in the sense of “so be it!” (para. 239-255) as she declares his destiny. Emphasizing how thoroughly she is turning all her considerable benevolence away from him, she adds, “What is that to me?” (para. 239-255). She will not mourn, there will be no lamentation over his loss. She, and by implication, the cosmos itself, the Land itself, does not care that he will not return. He is dead forever. Then

she adds what for him must have been a bitter, ironic twist. His name alone will live on, she will make sure of this. But not as a great or crazy criminal, or a contrite sinner, or a thief in the night, rather his name will be used to sweeten a song, and the song will be sung by a shepherd, not by a farmer. The song, in other words, will further the goddess, and her enterprise of sexuality as joy and celebration. Since in the myth of her courtship, the goddess had rejected the farmer as a suitor while accepting the shepherd, she is condemning Su-kale-tuda to be misrepresented by his rival, and not celebrated as antihero by his own farmer people. The song will be sung even in the palace of the King. As for Šu-kale-tuda, his palace will be the desert—the lifeless place, infertile and dry, from which he will never return.

Reconstructing Gender and Sexuality

Meador's (2000) archetypes are effectively guiding the way through this myth. As a warrior, Inanna halts all activity and demands redress; as a lover, her sexuality brings joy and abundance to all; and as priestess, she affects life, death, and afterlife. Yet what of the archetype, androgyne? As noted, the blood that Inanna sends through the waters of her lands indicates that this is a myth of transformation, a recipe for handling a certain form of insanity—misuse of the Land, and misuse of the Lady of Heaven and Earth, whose holy sexuality must be held sacred in order to maintain joy, and the abundance of life that accompanies joy. In addition to the menstrual blood signs, another indication that this myth is a transformative object lesson is the presence not only of the dust storm following the goddess and a flood proceeding her as she searches for her transgressor: she is also accompanied on her justice quest by a pilipili. This temple office is held by lamenters, mourners, singers, and those who go into ecstatic trance in behalf of the goddess. The office is highly shamanic, artful, and emotional, unlike a more staid temple function such as scribe, libation-pourer, or lamp-lighter.

The pilipili drum and dance while going into deep states of ecstasy or grief, and they are transformative in character. At least some of them are the “head-overturned” (Meador, 2000, p. 124) men and women whose gender has been changed by the goddess. In the section of a longer poem describing her process of switching the genders of a particular woman and man, Inanna names them “reed marsh woman [and] reed marsh man” (p. 124). Thus they are, metaphorically, geographically positioned as a combination of sweet water

and bitter (salty) water, they mix within themselves those firmly gendered elements, as well as the female earth. The oldest Sumerian creation myth is of Nammu, goddess of the womb of primeval seas, and Enki who as noted is the seminal god of sweet waters. Out of Nammu also came An, god of the sky and Ki, the first earth goddess. This all happened, the myth says, before anyone recognized the marshlands and their intermediary character as boundaries between river and sea.

One of Inanna's symbols is thought to consist of two bundles of reeds from the marshlands that may have held the doorposts of her granary. Again, a gateway or borderland is implied, as well as a guardianship. That Inanna is accompanied by a pilipili in her successful exertion of justice and rebalancing suggests she undertook a transformative justice ritual with not only artful blood rites but also shamanic and gender fluidity to help produce the outcome: setting boundaries of gendered behavior. This characteristic can be seen as part of the archetype of androgyny, giving the goddess (and the individual psyche) more tools, more aspects of the marshland, the in-between place, this estuary teeming with life forms from both sea and earth, where evolution—psychic and material—continues its roiling and beautiful creativity.

Such a transformation appears to happen in Inanna's bestowing of her transgressor's destiny. The narrative ties the crime of sexual transgression against the Sacred Female Principle to a second equally serious ecological crime against the same Principle, transgression against the Land, and the precious cosmic powers that rule it. He has set aside the laws of being, of reciprocity. Through the mindless disconnection of his transgressions, he has placed himself outside of both culture and nature, as he has broken the bond between them. There is no place for him, he has transgressed place itself; he is to be deprived of his life and more, his afterlife, his rebirth, and his history; he is to be deprived of everything about himself, including his crimes. Yet she thwarts his alienated disconnection, and turns his name back toward her sweetness of life force and sexuality; she converts his very name toward the positivity of her endeavors, and reabsorbs him into her vast being.

As a warrior, the goddess seeks justice, a balancing that keeps the Land protected just as surely as it keeps the people protected, and it keeps the Feminine Principle of reciprocity. As a lover, she uses her sexuality, and by extension everyone's sexuality, in rituals with

an aesthetic of eros for the benefit of all, including the plants. Her poets are priestesses mediating emotional intelligence; they tell stories that maintain connections between humans and the rest of creation; they co-create reality.

Inanna can be vulnerable, fierce, just, and tender. Through her diversity of forms, her people can more easily identify themselves with not only the goddess but also other creatures and beings. Her quest for justice however is from her warrior self: “what should be destroyed?” (Black et al., 1998-2001a, para. 221-230) and “who will compensate me?” (para. 239-255), both meanings balanced, because of the transgression against her vulva, that site of social and natural order. The myth implies that as modern women living in a world ruled to a large extent by the same kind of unconscious, mindless refusal to connect cause and effect of behaviors, we too could use a different approach to issues of sexual transgression. Were we to understand the inheritance of our sexuality as a power for positive social grace, allied so closely to the prosperity of the earth toward us and our being, we could effortlessly see a transgression of one as a transgression of the other, a diminishing of the joy that keeps all life revolving. We too can reconstruct gender to include reciprocity and justice.

The act of the gardener is a mindless transgression against civil order, against nature’s order, and against the joy inherent in sexuality that is, in the carefully proscribed rituals of the goddess, life enhancing. His act against the plants, pulling them up by the roots, he seems only to partially understand. His explanation, which seemed to be, what was the use of making the well when the plants were gone? (Black et al., 1998-2001a), reveals his utter incapacity to comprehend his own place in both culture and nature, and the consequences of his actions; his sense of cause and effect are warped. He has sand in his eyes. He has no allies in nature. In his psychology he lives in a desert of the heart. He sounds eerily like many leaders of our culture today.

Inanna had no sympathy for his lack of consciousness and heart connection; why should we tolerate this lack in our national and corporate leaders, or for that matter, in ourselves? The myth also implies that as mindless destroyers (consumers) of nature’s bounty, as people who casually set aside cosmic and natural order for our own impulses, we as a culture have sand in our eyes. Our culture is allowed to completely mis-define “economy,” omitting both the labor of women and the

necessities of the natural world. We are slow or even unable to see the connections between our actions and the consequences, or seeing them, to act. But we can change, we can relearn ourselves as land, as sea, as river, and as tree.

The myth tells us through the character of Inanna that when nature is not approached with love and respect, with mindfulness, and with consciousness of self, the result is chaos for us, and not just death, but also disappearance, and disconnection. The love carried by the goddess is not only maternal, though it is certainly that. The love is explicitly eros; the hearts joining in joy, in the ecstatic artful aesthetic of the body’s communication, of self and nature, of love. Eros is what a peach, a fig, or a honey-cake gives. If we could give to nature what a peach gives to us, we would have made the initial step.

The myth says that in order to live with nature’s bounty we must pay close and heart-filled attention to how we interact with her, which also means how we interact with each other and ourselves. To co-create with her, we must cultivate her joy, and accept at times her caprice, even her patterns that are or seem destructive or limiting to us. We must be wise to the places in her we must not touch; we must know when we are touching her inappropriately, inviting disaster upon ourselves and other living beings. The parts of us that use her heedlessly and heartlessly, we must “kill”—we must turn from them utterly, not glorify them in any way, and not give them a hiding place within ourselves.

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About the Journal

The *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies* is a peer-reviewed academic journal in print since 1981. It is published by Floragrades Foundation, and serves as the official publication of the International Transpersonal Association. The journal is available online at www.transpersonalstudies.org, and in print through www.lulu.com (search for IJTS).