



# The Earth and Life



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# The Earth and Life

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Religion is the emotion of awe towards and unification into the higher powers. This thesis considers the Earth as among such higher powers, and discusses how the religion of the circle of life and eternity is covered thoroughly in the myths relating to the earth mothers in ancient religions. The idea of the mother earth is an expression of a sentiment that has flown through the bottom current of every religion since prehistoric times.

## 1. Reproduction

### **Primordial mother of reproduction**

In the early stages of any civilization in the past, almost without exception, there has been a religion that regarded the earth as the mother and worshiped it as an individual goddess. From the very beginning when humans settled on the ground, man regarded the earth as something conceived as a source for creating living things. When humans still sought fruits in forests and fields and harvested fish from rivers and seas, the earth was a source of various natural bounty. The earth was a foundation on which a wide variety of plants and trees grew and many animals inhabited. The earth represented an infinite productive power as well as the source of all life and its fertility, and it was itself an inexhaustible life form and source of reproduction. It is no wonder, then, that it was conceived as a great mother who would generate and nurture all things. Combining the earth's maternal ability of birthing and productive ability, it came to be symbolized by images of prolific females.

The Theogony by Hesiod also mentions the

broad-chested goddess Gaia who was worshipped as the matrix of all creation and the first deity to have been born from Chaos. As a result, Gaia herself came to be considered the wellspring of life that produced all things. In fact, Gaia birthed Uranus (the sky) and Pontos (the sea), as well as the high mountains by virgin birth. Through the marriages to Uranus (the sky), Pontos (the sea), and Tartarus (the deep abyss), she continued to conceive gods, the Giants, the sea god, and monsters, including Titan and Cyclops. This ability of continuous reproduction was the quintessential nature of the Earth.

When Uranus imprisoned Cyclops and other monsters in the abyss, Gaia attempted to rescue them with the help of Cronus, another child of hers, who represents her maternal principle in action. Furthermore, when Cronus likewise imprisoned his brother Cyclops and the monsters, and when he swallowed the children he had with his sister Rhea, Gaia attempted to protect her last child Zeus by artifice. This is another expression of the maternal principle of the Earth. In addition, Gaia acted as a reproachful mother when, after his decade-long war with Cronus, a victorious Zeus imprisoned his father Cronus and Titanas was done to him. This, too, is based on the same principle. Gaia's attempt to turn the Gigas against Zeus by giving them the essence of a miracle plant she had birthed to grant them immortality and unmatched powers signifies the boundless power of generation and capacity for endless reproduction, as well as eternal life. As a being that produces, nurtures, and protects, the Earth was conceived as a maternal being.

### **Marriage of the Sky and the Earth**

Similar to the marriage of Uranus and Gaia's marriage producing various things, the idea that all things were created from the marriage of the sky and the earth is found in many myths around the world. The creation of the Japanese islands by two gods, Izanaki and Izanami, is another example of this sacred marriage of Father Sky and Mother Earth.

Izanaki and Izanami churned the world below with a

naginata called Amenonuboko. The drops of salty water fell from the tip to formed into Onogoroshima island, where they descended to reproduce the many islands of Japan. They then proceeded to birth many gods, including those of stones, dirt, the sea, estuaries, winds, woods, mountains, fields, and lastly, fire. Izanami continued to give birth to gods related to metal, pottery, water, and production, not by the sacred marriage but by the illness that arose from the burn she suffered in her genital when she delivered the god of fire. Meanwhile, Izanaki, after creating gods of the sun and thunder from the sword with which he had slashed the god of fire, returned from Yomi-no-kuni for a misogi ritual, as a result of which many celestial gods were born, including those of the sun and the moon. Izanaki was the paternal sky god, the Sky Father, and Izanami was the primordial mother of reproduction that exhaustively produced all things, the maternal goddess of the earth, the mother goddess.

The parents of many of the Indian gods, Dyaus and Prithvi, who appear in the Rigveda (1-160), an ancient Indian collection of the oldest sacred hymns, are usually addressed in the dualistic form of "Dyavaprthivi" (two gods of the sky and the earth). Dyaus, who represents the sky and the sun, is said to be the father of many gods and depicted as a bull. Prithvi, the mother of the gods, represents the earth and is depicted as a cow. Both gods never age, retain their beauty, protect all things as the parents of all existence, produce abundance nutrition and provide boundless blessings. In the hymn dedicated to Prithvi (5-84), Prithvi, the earth goddess, is celebrated as the bearer of the mountains, the supporter of the trees, and the bringer of abundance.

The birth of gods from the marriages of Cronus and Rhea, and Zeus and Hera, in ancient Greece can be seen as an imitation and repetition of the prototypal story of the holy marriage of the sky and the Earth in Uranus and Gaia. Both Rhea and Hera were original mother goddesses. Rhea, in particular, was the great goddess of Crete and the mother of the universe across the Aegean area.

The idea of the creation of all things by the sacred marriage of the Sky Father and the Earth Mother was common at the beginning of civilization across the world. This primitive concept included the idea that the creating of all things required a great power of the universe from before the sky and the Earth had been separated. People of the ancient times expressed it with the concept of the marriage of a male sky god and a female earth god. The act of reproduction by males and females among humans and other animals, too, was considered to have followed the prototype of the creation of all things by the sacred marriage of the Sky Father and the Earth Mother.

In ancient times when people lived in the wilderness, when the sky would cast the sunlight and send the rain, vegetation would sprout and grew lushly, insects would sing, animals would race around, granting man rich boons. The earth was considered to be the source and matrix of these various creatures. However, in order for the earth to produce an inexhaustible amount of these creations, light and rain from the sky was necessary. This was symbolized by the concept of the sacred marriage between the Sky Father and the Earth Mother. In fact, the rain that would fall from the sky was also seen as the sperm of the Sky Father that would fertilize the Earth Mother.

For the ancient people, the earth was, above all, the place where all living things were generated, a foundation on which all things took root, and the endless source of the infinite life force of the universe. It embodied eternity that transcended the life and death of all things. This eternal living earth was worshiped not just as a god but as the great mother goddess. Man took root firmly on this earth, through which he had a connection to the source life of this universe.

The fundamental life force of the universe that the ancient people anticipated through the earth is the very place where the spirit and the substance become one, the source from which the spirit and the substance emerge separately. Thus, the spirit and the substance are not separate, but the substance has to exist within the spirit, and the spirit within the substance, as

can be seen in our body. The substance must be seen as never dead but alive, containing a soul and life force within it. The ancient human beings grasped this through the Mother Earth as the source of life.

## 2. Fertility

### **Gods of fertility in the hunting era**

The faith in which the earth is the primordial mother of all living things, such as plants, animals, and humans, and that it is the mother goddess of reproduction belongs to the oldest part of human history, starting in the Paleolithic era. As the Neolithic Age started, it would come to be worshipped as the goddess of fertility with the gift of fruits and animals in the fields and mountains, as well as fishes in rivers and seas. Female figurines with enlarged hips and belly from the Neolithic era that have been found across the world were goddesses that promised such fertility and prolificacy. In addition, as people started to cultivate grains and other crops, they began to worship such goddesses of fertility with increased vigor. The modern goddess of earth was no longer just the primordial mother of reproduction that created all things, but gradually became the fertility goddess who grew grains and provided a rich harvest. Ceremonies for this modern goddess as the fertility goddess grew alongside the development of agricultural culture, which came about along with the various earth goddesses' life histories, which would be told as a part of the mythology.

Artemis, the ancient Greek goddess who amused herself in wilderness with hunting represented an earth goddess with remnants of the hunting era. The earth was conceived not only as the source of reproductive power that grew grass and trees, it was also conceived as a primordial mother that produced abundant animals that would roam mountains and fields. This is the reason why Artemis was considered a guardian of wild animals and humans. The statues of a goddess with many breasts worshipped in Ephesus were likely thought to represent Artemis because



Artemis was the modern goddess of the indigenous people of ancient Greece, as well as a protector goddess of fertility and birthing of animals and humans.

Artemis was also a goddess of the hunt and archery who would accompany spirits and nymphs to hunting. It may seem contradictory that the guardian of wild animals is also a killer of them, but it is not necessarily a contradictory idea. It was probably imagined that in creating abundant wild animals, the earth goddess also required many sacrificial animals. In exchange for such sacrifices, Artemis would promise plentiful bounty of the hunt and success in battle.

In ancient Greece, Artemis was considered a young virgin goddess of chastity. Thus, she showed a quite ferocious aspect to those who would disrupt her duties. When Tityos, the giant, attempted to rape her mother Leto, Artemis, together with her brother Apollo, shot him dead and dropped him into the deep abyss called Tartarus where he would be forever tortured by vultures who fed on his liver. When Niobe boasted of her many children to Leto who only had two, Artemis and Apollo retaliated by killing most of her children with arrows. When Actaeon saw Artemis bathing, he was transformed into a deer and devoured by his hunting dogs. These tales of Artemis were likely based on her archetype as a mother goddess from the hunting era.

Similar to Artemis, Cybele, originally a goddess of Phrygia of Asia Minor, was a mother goddess with remnants of the hunting era. Cybele is a guardian of children and wild animals who was considered the equivalent of Rhea in Greece and represented the modern earth.

When a mysterious androgynous being was born from Zeus' seed, the surprised gods cut off its male organ. This being grew up to become goddess Cybele. The removed genital fell onto the soil and grew up into an almond tree. One of its fruits entered the bosom of Nana, the daughter of the river Sangarius, as a result of which she had a baby boy named Attis. Attis was soon abandoned in a mountain, but mysteriously nursed by a he-goat and grew into a beautiful man. Cybele fell in love with him. For

Cybele, the earth goddess to maintain her fertility and reproductive capabilities, she needed the young lover who was originally one with her.

Much like Artemis, the earth goddess from the hunting era had a quite ferocious side to her. In fact, jealous that Attis did not return the affection, Cybele turned him mad, which caused him to castrate himself and eventually die. In this way, Attis was made a sacrifice to the goddess Cybele. However, regretting her own cruelty, Cybele persuaded Zeus to grant that the body of Attis should neither rot at all nor decay. It is mentioned that even after the burial, his little finger kept moving and his hair continuing to grow.

Medusa, who was treated as a monster in Greece, was originally a modern goddess of a foreign land. Even though her face was beautiful, her cheeks were deathly pale, her forehead wrinkled in agony, and her lips were thin and lurid like venomous snakes. Each strand of her hair had turned into a venomous snake, coiling up around her temples and flicking its forked tongue. Medusa was a mother to many monsters. Anyone who she gazed upon would turn to stone. Perseus, after a long journey, eliminated this villain by severing her head and brought it home to dedicate it to the goddess Athena.

Medusa is counted as one of the gorgons (monsters) in Greece, but originally, she was a Great Goddess of the Amazoness of Libya and the mother of all gods. Each of Medusa's locks took the shape of a snake to represent strong vitality and productivity. Goddesses with snakes like Medusa are known across the world. Those snakes represented male organs as well as water. They were thought to have a mystical power to impregnate those earth goddesses.

### **Fertility gods of the agriculture era**

With the advent of agricultural society, faith in Mother Earth became increasingly popular as it started to take the form of worshipping a fertility goddess who would richly grow wheat, rice, and other grains. In particular, as grain cultivation began,



the presence of women who likely participated in the cultivation grew, and the faith in Mother Earth began to reflect this growing maternal power. Women's capabilities to produce and nurture were linked to the concept of the productivity of the earth. In this way, Mother Earth came to be actively worshipped as a mother goddess with mystical powers of great productivity. The earth was a mother and giver of life.

The story of Ishtar of ancient Babylonia is one of such fertility goddess. However, considering that Ishtar is said to be the queen of the sky, it may not be necessarily accurate to call her the goddess of Mother Earth. However, the various roles of Ishtar suggest that she was likely a maternal goddess of earth, the modern goddess. "Hymn to Ishtar" celebrates her as the majestic queen of the world who formed all human lives. Originally, Ishtar was worshiped by the Babylonians as a mother goddess who created this world and man. But she is also praised as the queen of the majestic world which shaped all human lives.

Ishtar is also said to be a highly promiscuous goddess who moved from one lover to another. Among her lovers, the most famous is the agricultural god Tammuz who could probably be regarded as Ishtar's alter ego. In fact, Tammuz was the one who taught people to make crops and cultivate fruits. He would spend a certain period as the god of shepherds and agriculture, enjoying the unlimited affection of Ishtar as her lover. It was believed that for that period, the domesticated sheep would grow in number and the cultivated wheat would yield an abundant harvest. Ishtar was also the god of medicine, celebrated for her ability to extend the life of the mortally ill and cure their illnesses.

Isis, the Great Goddess of ancient Egypt, too, was a fertility god that had evolved from a mother goddess. In spring, the earth has the reproductive ability to germinate plants and grains again that once withered during winter. Likewise, Isis of ancient Egypt, similar to Ishtar of ancient Babylonia, was thought to have the life force to cure sick people, give immortality, and resurrect the dead. The image of Isis overlaps with that of the Mother Earth as the source of such life force.

Isis descended to the city of Thebes to heal the sick and console the children, while her husband Osiris taught the people agricultural techniques to increase their harvest. Osiris later became the king of Egypt, but he was trapped in an ebony chest and thrown into the Nile by the artifice of his brother Set. Isis, having lost her beloved husband, wandered along the shores of the Nile to find his coffin. In her journey, she learnt that the coffin of Osiris had become a pillar of the royal palace in Byblos. Once at the palace of Byblos, Isis healed the illness of their prince and became his nurse. Intending to give him immortality, she put the prince in a fire, but he was taken out of it by the surprised queen, as a result of which he was only granted a normal human longevity. Isis retrieved the coffin from the pillar and returned to Egypt while protecting her husband's corpse, but as Set close in on them, she and Horus, the son of Osiris and her, had to flee and wander around the country again. During that time, the body of Osiris was dismembered and thrown into the Nile. Holding a young Horus, Isis struggled for years to retrieve each piece of his body from all over Egypt. However, she could not find his penis. Isis reconstructed it with clay to complete the body before mummifying it. In this way, Osiris was resurrected, not in this world but in the underworld as the king of the land of the dead.

The name Isis derives from "seat" or "throne," and the kings of Egypt assumed their kingship by sitting on these laps of Isis. In other words, in Egypt, kingship was conditioned on sitting on the earth and being embraced by it. Through this process, the kings would acquire the mystical power to bring forth the fertility of the earth.

The worship of Isis, the goddess of this Mother Earth, went on to spread throughout the Mediterranean Sea, and across the ancient Roman world towards the end of the formative centuries. In the 4th century, the Isis worship was driven away by Christianity, but it was integrated into it in the form of Virgin Mary worship. A portrait depicting Isis breastfeeding her child Horus was the prototype of the portrait of Our Lady Mary and the infant Jesus. The biblical record that the Virgin Mary Jesus as an

infant wandered around Egypt to encounter various events was based on the wandering journey of Isis and Horus. Mother-child images like those of Maria and Jesus, as well as those of Isis and Horus, represent man as the child of the earth, a powerless toddler who is dependent on its parent.

Demeter of ancient Greece, too, was a fertility goddess evolved from a mother goddess. The name "Demeter" itself means "Mother Earth," and she was, above all, the guardian of the productivity of the earth and the bringer of a copious harvest of grains. While Gaia, another mother goddess who represented endless productivity, had some remnants of an older earth god, Demeter was the god of earth and fertility that appeared after the spread of agriculture.

Demeter wandered over the earth in the form of a human, kindly gifting the boon of harvest to the hospitable and giving the punishment of a poor crop to the inhospitable. After arriving at Eleusis, Demeter was so touched by the kindness of King Keleos and his family that she volunteered to become the nurse of their newborn prince Demophon. He grew rapidly as Demeter would apply scented oil on him during the day and put him in a fire at nights to give him immortality. However, Queen Metaneira gave a scream of terror when she heard of the ritual. Angered, Demeter threw the child onto the floor. This tale was derived from a story of Isis in ancient Egypt.

Having exposed her true nature as a goddess, Demeter ordered King Keleos to build a temple to worship her in the land of Eleusis and initiated him into a secret ritual. In addition, she gave Triptolemus the gift of the ear of a grain so that he could spread it among humans and grant the world the boon of fertility to convey the grace of fertility to the world, and this was transmitted to humans. It was also Demeter who ordered Keleos to protect Triptolemus who had returned to Eleusis after his journey. In this way, the power of mother goddess helped the young Triptolemus become a king who promised fertility. It is for this reason that the chariot that carried Triptolemus as he distributed wheat was dragged by dragons and snakes. Dragons

and snakes were symbols of the mystical powers of the earth.

As it is apparent from her role in teaching agricultural techniques to Triptolemus, Demeter was a fertility goddess of the agricultural era. The ancient Greeks believed that the fertility and barrenness of the earth were determined by the mood of this goddess. They saw the ebb and flow of the vitality of the earth in the successes and failures of grain harvest that they had each year. For this reason, they tried to gain the earth goddess' favor through various rituals. The festival at Eleusis was the largest among them.

Bride, the queen of Angus the King of Summer of Scotland, was another fertility goddess. Many revered them as god that brought fertile and happy periods. The beautiful and young Princess Bride was kept captive by Beira, the Queen of Winter. But as spring approached, she knew that the season of King Angus was near. In a dream, she learned that Angus would come to her rescue, and shed a tear of joy, and on the place where the tear fell, a violet sprang up. Soon afterwards, Bride and Angus on his white steed met, and fairies came out of the woods to celebrate the two. When the Fairy Queen waved her wand, Bride's ragged clothing was transformed into a beautiful robe, with fair spring flowers in her hair, a white wand entwined with golden grain stalks in her right hand, and a golden horn in her left hand, which was called the "Horn of Plenty." As the couple left the fairy palace, Angus cast magic spells while Bride waved her hand, which made the grass spring forth. People celebrated the King and the Queen as they knew spring came so that all things might grow. They named this first day of spring the day of Bride. The Sun shone on the earth, flowers started to bloom, grains were sown, and people prayed to Bride for a rich harvest.

Among the gods that appear in the myths of the Celts in Ireland, goddesses Danu and Ethniu, for example, were maternal earth goddesses that promised fertility. Goddess Danu is called the mother of all Irish gods. With Goddess Danu as their mother, the widely revered lineage of gods was thought to represent light and knowledge, and later were associated with the concept of

bringing fertility and productivity to the earth. Goddess Ethniu was a daughter of Danu's family who was the goddess of love who inspired a great passion in people, as well as a goddess of the earth who promised fertility. It is said that when Ethniu was about to have her son Gerald, she planted peas all over a hill overnight. That hill is still preserved near Lough Gur, Munster, in the name of the Hill of Áine.

The great earth mother Prithvi who is paired with the Sky Father Dyaus of ancient India, too, is recognized as a fertility goddess. Under the rule of King Prithu, people on the earth suffered a terrible famine. Prithu attempted to corner Prithvi into bring forth a plentiful harvest. Prithvi promised him to resurrect the destroyed grain and vegetables with her milk. It was believed that the grain and vegetables people eat had been produced in this way.

### **Mother of grain**

Earth goddesses of fertility also serve as the mothers of grain, as can be seen in Demeter giving grain seeds to Triptolemus and Prithvi spreading grain around the human world. Japanese deities such as Ōgetsuhime, Uke-mochi and Kami-musubi, too, are fertility goddesses in the form of such mothers of grain. The story of Ōgetsuhime that tells the origin of grain, for example, is a vivid testament to people's trust in the productivity of the earth.

When Susanoo, who had just descended to the lower world, asked for a feast, Ōgetsuhime took various foods out of her nose, mouth, and hips before preparing them for him. Susanoo secretly saw it and killed her in retaliation for her discourtesy. From the head of her dead body maggots sprang forth, rice seeds from the eyes, millet from the ears, wheat from the genitals, and soy from the hips. Kami-musubi-no-mioya-no-mikoto then took those seeds to grow them.

This well-known tale of metamorphosis that explains the origin of grain represents the relationship between man and nature. Ōgetsuhime who offered an unlimited supply of food, such



as that requested by Susanoo, symbolizes the boon of the earth that provides various foods for man to feed on. This story of the murder of Ōgetsuhime by Susanoo likely intends to teach that man learned to cultivate and gain plentiful food from various grains thanks to the sacrifice and boons of the earth. The tale of the metamorphosis of Ōgetsuhime's body tells of the admiration for the generous earth.

The story of Uke-mochi, too, is a story of metamorphosis of the dead as the origin of grain that represents a similar idea. When Tsukuyomi descended to the lower world and visited Uke-mochi, she turned her head in the direction of the nation and took rice from her mouth, then she faced the ocean and spat out large and small fishes, turned to the mountains to cough out animals of rough and soft hairs, and prepared them into a feast for him. Angered, Tsukuyomi struck Uke-mochi dead with his sword. From the head of her dead body a cow and a horse sprang forth, millet from the forehead, silkworms from the eyebrows, Japanese millet in her eyes, rice in her stomach, and wheat, beans, and azuki in her genitals.

Uke-mochi was a goddess of food who also symbolized productivity. Stories of Ōgetsuhime and Uke-mochi tell of the idea that man only enjoys plentiful food because of the sacrifice of the earth. Both stories convey people's reverence for the infinite productivity of Mother Earth. It was believed that the sacrifice of Mother Earth was what promised plentiful harvest and abundance of life.

Kami-musubi, who was closely related to Izumo deities, was another goddess of productivity with the aspect of the mother goddess of all living things. Kami-musubi once revived Ōanamuji (Ōkuninushi) murdered by the Yaso-gami at the request of his mother goddess. Kami-musubi was a goddess with the ability to resurrect the dead. This mother goddess also played a role in the production of grain when she took the seeds from the remains of Ōgetsuhime and sowed them. The word "musubi" itself represents the mystical productive powers. For this reason, Kami-musubi was also the mother of Sukunabikona, a small god of the spirit of



grain who is said to be a seed of the sweet potato or the millet.

When Ōkuninushi visited Mihonomisaki, he saw a god who traveled above the waves and did not announce himself. When he asked Kuebiko, the scarecrow god who knows all about everything under the sun, he answered, "This is Sukunabikona-no-kami, the son of the Goddess Kami-musubi." Kami-musubi said, "Indeed, this is my child who slipped through my fingers," and ordered him to "be brothers with Ashiharashikoo (Ōkuninushi) and create and defend this country." Here, Kami-musubi acts as the mother of the god of the spirit of grain and a god who symbolizes productivity. It is implied in this tale that Ōkuninushi and Sukunabikona managed to create the country together thanks to this productivity of agriculture.

The idea that the god of the spirit of grain was born from the mother of grain can be seen in Aztec of ancient Mexico as well. Xipe Totec was the son of Chicomecoatl, the goddess of corn, and the god of the spirit of grain. However, this god would show himself dressed in flayed human skin and demanded many sacrifices in return for annual harvest that he would bring. It is said that because of this, the annual festival for Xipe Totex included a ritual where the heart of the victim was extracted before the skin was flayed and worn by the priest. The priest wearing the skin represented the revival of Xipe Totec, the son of the goddess of corn and the god of the spirit of grain. When corn germinates, the husk needs to be broken through, and when it's harvested, it needs to be peeled. This increase ritual likely symbolizes that aspect.

### **Goddess of love**

Since the maternal goddesses of the earth were also thought to interact with many male gods to exercise their productivity, mother goddesses also took the form of goddesses of love. Aphrodite of ancient Greece is a prime example of them.

Aphrodite was the goddess of fertility, beauty, and love, who was capable of inspiring love in many gods. According to Hesiod, she was born from the foam of the sperm from the

genitals of Uranus severed and thrown into the sea by Cronus. According to Homer, Aphrodite, the goddess of lust, was considered to be highly promiscuous. Her husband Hephaestus used an invisible net to capture her embracing Ares, the god of war, together with the bed they lied on. The two were released with the mediation of Poseidon, the god of the sea. She had several children with Ares, including Deimos (dread), Phobos (fear), and Harmonia (harmony). Aphrodite had many other consorts, and gave birth to Priapus, who had oversized genitals, with Dionysus, the god of wine and ritual madness; Eryx with Poseidon; and Hermaphroditus with Hermes, the messenger. Of her many liaisons with humans, her love affair with the beautiful youth Adonis is well known. When he was gored to death by a wild boar, a saddened Aphrodite let an anemone flower spring from his blood.

What Adonis was to Aphrodite is an equivalent of what Tammuz was to Ishtar of ancient Babylonia. Adonis and Tammuz were gods of plants and crops who would die on the earth and are reborn. Ishtar paired with Tammuz and Aphrodite paired with Adonis were both earth goddesses who were also promiscuous goddesses of love.

The well-known Scandinavian goddess Freja was another fertility goddess of beauty and love. She wept for a long time after her husband Óðr left her to go on a journey, and got on a chariot driven by several cats in search for him. Cats were animals Freja loved the most and represented lust, sensuality, and productivity. She wept tears everywhere she went to look for him, which turned to gold buried underground. The two were finally reunited in the south and returned hand-in-hand to Asgard, the realm of the gods. Freja's footsteps were light, and with each step she took, the grass turned green and trees bore flowers while the birds sang songs of joy. In addition to being the goddess of love, Freja was originally a fertility goddess who represented the productivity of the earth.

Like Uma, Parvati of India was a goddess of love who evolved from a mother goddess. The name Parvati means

"daughter of the mountains," and like Uma, she was the wife of Shiva. Parvati grows impatient of her husband who was immersed in meditation. When Kamadeva, the god of lust, shot an arrow of desire at Shiva, he opened his eye in his forehead and incinerated him to ashes. Parvati grew wary of Shiva's endless meditation and retired into the mountains. One day, a young Brahmin monk visited her and spoke ill of Shiva in an attempt to send her back to the secular world. However, Parvati's faith in Shiva was firm. The Brahmin monk revealed himself as Shiva and courted her. The two moved to Mount Kailash to live happily together.

### 3. Death

#### **Descent to the underworld**

In the spring, grass springs up on the earth, flowers bloom, tree leaves sprout, grain grows, beasts roam around the mountains, little birds sing, and all living things regain vitality. The earth was the source of life that produced and nurtured all living things. This infinite productivity was connected to that of man and animals, and reimagined as the earth goddesses.

But in the winter, the flowers die, the tree leaves fall, the grain is harvested, the beasts and the birds of the wild withdraw into their nests, and the insects return to the earth after their short lives. The earth was also a bosom to which all live came back to wither and die.

In this way, the earth, which was seen as the source of all lives and infinite productivity, was also seen as the place of death to which all lives return. Humans, animals, and plants are all born from the earth, and return to it. Thus, ancient people imagined that there was a land of dead, the underworld in the ground where all living things eventually return to rest. It is for this reason that the earth goddesses with infinite productivity would visit their consorts and children in the underworld or become queens of it themselves in various myths and legends.

The ancient Babylonian earth goddess Ishtar's visit to

the underworld is representative of them. In this region, the season when the living things withered was not winter but summer.

Having lost her consort Tammuz, Ishtar lamented day after day. People on the earth also continued to mourn for Tammuz when the extreme heat of the sun brought an extreme drought. After the agricultural god Tammuz was taken to the underworld, the fields and ranches withered, crops ceased to yield any grain, and the number of livestock continued to decline. Alarmed, Ishtar descended into the underworld and went through seven gates and many obstacles to ask Ereshkigal, the Queen of the Underworld, to return Tammuz to her. Ereshkigal refuses her request and had her servant Namtar defeat her with curses. As the death of Ishtar would mean the end of the fertility of the earth, the gods on the earth hurriedly consulted and sent out the half-lion Asu-shu-namir. Asu-shu-namir delivers the order of the great god of the earth to release Ishtar, which Ereshkigal reluctantly accepted. Ishtar was sprinkled with the water of life and returned to the upper world.

This well-known tale Ishtar's descent to the underworld originated from the Sumerian myth of goddess Inanna who would descend to the underworld once a year, and this agricultural myth went on to influence ancient Greek myths such as the tale of Demeter and Persephone as well as that of Aphrodite and Adonis. The descent of the earth goddess to the underworld was likely imagined on the basis of the midsummer desert climate where all living things wither under the burning sun.

The famous ancient Greek story of the fertility goddess Demeter in search of her daughter Persephone abducted by the ruler of the underworld, too, indicates that the ideas of Mother Earth and death were closely connected.

Persephone was gathering flowers on a Sicilian Island when Hades came to abduct her. She continued to weep in the underworld and refused any food. Her mother Demeter wandered around in search for her ceaselessly without eating or drinking. Frenzied at the news of her daughter's abduction, she inflicted

drought and famine on the land of Sicily that had betrayed her. While Demeter hid herself from other gods and stayed in the temple in Eleusis, the earth did not produce any harvests and became barren. A worried Zeus decided to retrieve Persephone to the upper world if she had not eaten any food of the underworld. It was prescribed that anyone who ate or drank in the underworld had to stay there forever. But Persephone had eaten a few pomegranate seeds that Hades had given her before she left. With the mediation of Zeus, it was decided that Persephone would spend a third of each year as the wife of Hades, queen of the underworld, and goddess of death and revenge, and the remaining part of the year with her mother Demeter and together represent the fertility of the earth. It was believed that this made the earth completely dry and barren during the hot summer for a third of each year, and people sowed, grew, and harvested wheat for the remainder of the year from early autumn to early summer.

The mother and daughter Demeter and Persephone are closely connected through feminine principles such as production, nurture, and protection of life. Hades as a male was imagined as the abductor of the daughter from this deep feminine connectedness. The idea that Demeter retrieved Persephone represents the recovery of this feminine principle that is productivity. Thus, this recovery ensured the plentiful harvests of the year.

Persephone was an alter ego of Demeter and, similarly to her mother, a fertility goddess. For this reason, it was believed that when Demeter and Persephone were out of humor and would not eat, the earth would become barren. The fact that that fertility goddess Persephone simultaneously became the queen of the underworld represents the idea that the earth with its infinite productivity can also consume all living things.

### **Move to the underworld**

The image of the earth and death is expressed not in the form of a visit to the underworld by a fertility goddess but also in the form of the goddess herself moving to the underworld to



become its queen, as can be seen in the story of Persephone.

Isis, a fertility goddess of ancient Egypt, too, became the queen of the underworld as the wife of Osiris, the king of the underworld. After a long wandering journey, she resurrected her husband Osiris as the king of the underworld, and assumed the seat of queen next to his throne. The spirits of the dead would go aboard the ship of the sun god Ra to travel through five countries of the underworld (Duat) to reach the court of Osiris, where they would be judged for the acts they committed in the world of the living.

The Japanese deity Izanami, who gave birth to many islands and gods, was clearly another maternal goddess of earth who would produce all things endlessly. But at the same time, Izanami became a god of the underworld called Yomi-no-kuni after she died from the burn in the genitals she suffered as she gave birth to the fire god Kagu-tsuchi.

When Izanagi asked Izanami to return, much like the Greek Persephone, she said that she could no longer return because she had eaten the food of the underworld. When Izanami turned to consult Yomotsu-kami, Izanagi grew impatient and looked at her against her request. Izanami's body was ravaged by maggots and her body parts were giving out eight kinds of lightning. Lightning was a god who connected the sky and the earth to bring rain and fertility to the earth. Lightning nested in the body of the earth goddess Izanami for this reason.

A horrified Izanagi turned to flee, but Izanami chased after him. As they parted at the Yomo-tsu-hirasaka, Izanami said, "I will kill a thousand descendants of your world each day." Thus, Izanami went on to reside in the realm of the dead as Yomo-tsu-Ōkami, the queen of the underworld.

Again, Izanami was a maternal goddess of the earth who would create all life forms, and for that reason, she was also a goddess who brought death to all things. Life and death, as well as creation and destruction, were deeply interconnected through the earth.



## Queen of the underworld

The belief that all living things are born from the earth and return to the earth is quite old. Due to this, some earth goddesses who would produce living things were also seen as queens of the realm of the dead. The womb of the earth was a place where the dead would settle and rest. Death meant to return to the bosom Mother Earth and its womb. Such idea originated from the time when the dead were buried in nearby fields and mountains. Since then, the earth has been seen as an eternal resting place for the dead, and earth goddesses were seen as rulers of their world. In the Atharva-Veda (12-1-14), a collection of rituals of ancient India, "Earth is my mother, I am earth's son, [...]mortal creatures produced from thee return to thee."

As the earth was seen as a great power that would swallow all living things, earth goddesses were also imagined as cruel goddesses who would ceaselessly kill humans and animals. The ancient Egyptian goddess Hattel is one example.

Lamenting that humans began to rebel against him under his long rule, the celestial god Ra transformed his eye into goddess Hathor and had her massacre humans. She ran around the nation and dedicated herself to her duty. This caused Ra to relent and wish to save the remaining humans. He prepared beer with herb, wheat, and human blood, and placed it at her resting area where she returns after her daily massacre. As she drank the beer, she became drunk and lost her taste for human flesh. Ra then asked her to return and mankind was saved.

In ancient Egypt, people would hold a festival on the first day of New Year where they would prepare and offer beer to the goddess Hathor and danced throughout the night to celebrate this departure of Hathor. New Year's day was the day when the weakened power of the Sun would begin to resurge, and the symbolic day after which spring would come and crops would start to regrow. It was believed that after this day, the long-weakened human vitality, too, would resurge. The departure of Hathor whose duty was the massacre of humans was imagined

from such an idea.

Hekate of ancient Greece who is often depicted as a goddess of the nether world, too, was originally an earth goddess of Asia Minor associated with fertility. According to the Theogony (411-452), Hekate was a goddess whom Zeus worshipped above all else, and she had rulership over the sky, the earth, and the sea. She would also grow herds of cows and goats and nurture children, and it was believed that she granted good fortune to those who prayed to her. However, similarly to Persephone, she was also seen as a ruler of the underworld because of this aspect of a mother goddess. In addition, she would come out of this underworld, ruled the dark nights, enjoyed roaming cemeteries, acted as a patron of magic and witchcraft, caused strange happenings, and destroyed many humans. Because she was also seen as a ruler of dark streets and a goddess of fortune, she was also considered a guardian of crossroads and a goddess of the moon who would lead the dead to the underworld.

Hel, the Norse queen of underworld and goddess of death, had no remnants of fertility goddess, and she was only a goddess that presided over hell under the ground. Hel, being a daughter of the vilest god Loki and Angrboða, a giantess who represented evil, was imagined as a vile goddess that would bring various misfortunes. She had a face as cold as ice and as terrifying as that of a wolf, and one half of her body was as pale as lead and the other half was as red as blood. Odin, the ruler of the gods, imprisoned her in the bottom of the ice-cold realm so that she might not bring disasters in the future. However, she created a realm for the dead in this underground world. The dead would be forced to go through a harrowing journey to reach this hell. Those who had committed evil acts would be put through unspeakable suffering in this hell. Hell the goddess of the underworld would sometimes come out into the human world on a three-legged horse or a broom. She would then swing a huge rake around to gather humans together and take them back to hell. As the ruler of hell, she would dream of scenes of the destruction of the world, awaiting the day when she would satisfy her thirst for revenge

against other gods.

Based on the image of the earth that would consume all living things, Nordic people with their great imagination imagined horrifying hell and its queen with the backdrop of their harsh and dark climate.

While Beira was not the queen of the underworld, she was the Scottish goddess of winter who would make everything from grass to trees to crops wither away. Beira, who took the form of an old woman, was tall with one eye that was piercing cold and as quick-sighted as a mackerel, and her gloomy face was dull and pale in complexion. Beira ruled over four red realms of the world only during winter, and as spring would begin, everything would begin to rebel against her. Beira did all she could to prevent vegetation growth. When Princess Bride who had been captured throughout the winter was taken away by her own son Angus as spring approached, Beira ordered eight hideous hags that served her to chase them, and she herself ran rampant with storms and frost, attempting to freeze the earth by hitting it with a magical hammer. This caused misfortunes and disasters across the nation, killing sheep, goats, horses, and cows.

In this way, the winter goddess Beira reflected Scotland's desolate winter climate and was imagined as a terrible old woman, but it is likely that she, too, was originally a goddess of the fertility of the earth. Beira was originally thought to be the mother of all Scottish gods. In fact, Beira's descendants included many races including spirits of light and the sea as well as green witches. In addition, she was said to have lived for hundreds of years. The legends that state Beira created rivers and lakes, mountains and valleys, and islands of Scotland indicates that she was also a creator god who nurtured the earth. It is possible that the fertility goddess Bride and her husband Angus, the king of Summer, were alter egos of this earth goddess Beira. Beira was probably reduced to an ugly goddess of winter that would bring infertility because the aspect of a fertility goddess was separated from her. If we suppose that, it implies the duality of an earth goddess simultaneously being a goddess of infertility who

consumes and wizens all things.

The Indian fertility goddess Kali, too, turned to a goddess of destruction who had a taste for blood and enjoyed massacre. Kali was the most powerful among the Hindu gods depicted with a bloodied sword in her first right hand, a trident in the second right hand, a severed head in the first left hand, and a skull-cup to catch its blood with, as well as a garland of severed heads around her neck. Because Kali was believed to prefer animal blood, her festivals included the beheading of countless goats whose blood would then be offered to her.

Kali, who is imagined as a terrifying goddess of destruction, was originally born from the Great Goddess. When the ancient gods were about to be conquered by the brother Asuras Shumba and Nishumba, they called for the help of the Great Goddess. In response, the Great Goddess appeared in the form of Durga (Parvati), the wife of Shiva and fought the servants of the Asuras. It was at this moment that Kali with a gaping mouth and bloodshot eyes was born from the angered face of this goddess to fight the Asuras and claim their heads. Kali proceeded to kill the evil gods born from the blood of the Asuras by swallowing them and drinking their blood.

Kali herself is seen as a wife of Shiva, but she was also imagined as the goddess of time and color black. It was for this reason that she was seen as a goddess who would consume everything, similarly to Cronus of Greece. Kali was the maternal earth that would give life to all living things while simultaneously bringing death and destruction to all things.

#### 4. Rebirth and rotation

##### **Rebirth**

The direction of “life to death” where all living things are born from the earth and return to it went on to evolve into that of “death to life,” the idea of rebirth where what returned to the earth will be reborn from the earth.

Once spring comes, the grass on the earth that has

withered as winter came will sprout and bear flowers. The dead-looking trees that have shed all leaves will grow fresh, green leaves and thrive. The crops that were harvested in the fall will produce seeds to survive the winter and, if sowed in the spring, sprout again from the fields and produce a rich harvest. The insects that live under the trees in the wilderness die as winter comes, and their bodies are buried in the soil and return to it, but the eggs they laid will hatch as grass and flowers sprout after a long winter.

The changing seasons responsible for the life and death of the vegetation and animals are brought forth by what could be described as the life and death of the sun. On the day of the winter solstice in December is when the power of the sun becomes the weakest as it sinks beyond the horizon, but this is also the day when the sun starts to regain its strength. Since ancient times, many festivals have been held to celebrate this regeneration of the sun.

The earth was a womb, a place on which the living would die and from which the dead would be reborn. Life means a departure from the womb of the earth, and death means a return to it. Thus, it is understandable that ancient people imagined that life forms would come out again from that womb.

In Hinduism in India, the world was thought to repeat creation and destruction, as well as death and rebirth. There is no death without life, and there is no life without death. As such, deities like Shiva and Kali were thought to be great forces that could thoroughly destroy everything in this world, while also being great forces that would create all things. Destruction also leads to regeneration. Nature brings disaster and destruction to humans through storms, floods, droughts, and earthquakes, while also providing plentiful harvests and growing animals in the wilderness. The earth is a bringer of disaster and destruction and a great force of boons and creation. The ideas of the Hindu gods reflect this conflicting duality of nature. The earth was seen as a great driving force that would repeat death and rebirth, thus maintaining eternal life.



The story of the ancient Babylonian Great Goddess Ishtar's search for her dead consort Tammuz in the underworld and his retrieval, too, symbolizes the death and rebirth of the vitality of the earth. When Ishtar descended to the underworld to look for Tammuz, crops on the ground ceased to grow and livestock did not breed. But as soon as Ishtar took Tammuz back, all things in the upperworld were revitalized. Following the New Year festival, a ritual would be held where the sacred play that told of Ishtar's descent to the underworld and the resurrection of Tammuz was played, and the finale was the day of joy where Tammuz would be resurrected. This was the symbolic day from which the new year would be reckoned. Ancient Babylonians thought that the month from which the new year would start (March – April) to be the month when Ishtar and Tammuz would share their bed. It was believed that the vitality of vegetation and crops would return from this month onwards.

Astarte, one of the oldest Great Goddesses of the Middle Eastern region along with Ishtar, was the goddess of the moon from Byblos in ancient Phoenicia. The breasts of the Astarte statues that remain in various places are either held or revealed, because the breasts were a symbol of nurturing life. In Syria and Egypt, on December 25th every year, the rebirth of Adonis from the celestial maiden Astarte was celebrated through a holy play for Astarte. This was a winter solstice festival. Adonis was both a son and consort of Astarte. Adonis was struck dead by a boar, an animal of winter, but he was allowed to return to the upperworld for half a year annually to live with her lover. The worship of Astarte and Adonis spread from Lebanon to Alexandria to Athens to Rome, and it was particularly popular among women. They would empathize with Astarte, cry for Adonis, and celebrated his resurrection. One of the archetypes of the Christian legend of Virgin Mary's delivery of Jesus the Son of God is said to be this festival of Astarte and Adonis. Like Jesus, Adonis was resurrected after a painful demise.

The ritual of Eleusis of ancient Greece celebrated the fertility goddess Demeter's retrieval of her daughter Persephone.



The main festival that was held every fall would start with a parade spanning the whole day, and in accordance with the old customs of the Golden Age, local produce would be offered to temples dedicated to Demeter as people would pilgrimage. In addition, the story of the disappearance and return of Persephone would be played with music and dances.

Wheat seeds are buried and preserved in the dark underground during the summer and sowed in fall to sprout again. This death and rebirth of grain is symbolized by the myth of Persephone's abduction and return. The rite in Eleusis a grand re-enactment of it. In the secret ceremony during this rite, a ritual related to the resurrection of the goddess would be held to promise rebirth to the participants. People participated in this ritual to go through the experience of being children of the earth, to which they would return and from which they would be reborn.

The ancient Egyptian goddess Isis, too, resurrected her husband Osiris after gathering his dismembered body parts. As she chanted, "Behold, I see thee lie, the might of the great one hath weakened, ... Osiris, the ill-fated one, thou shalt rise and live, I am Isis," Osiris rose up and regained life, embraced Isis, and his life was maintained without a respite. The hero god Osiris who imparted plenty of wisdom and technologies to the Egyptian people, too, was resurrected by the maternal earth goddess Isis. This, too, reflects the idea that on the earth the dead will be reborn and life continues on.

Lemminkäinen, a carefree sybarite who appears in the Finnish epic the Kalevala, was resurrected from death by the power of his mother. After his disappearance, his mother frantically searched for him and eventually learned that his lifeless body lied at the bottom of the black river in the underworld. She had the heroic artificer Ilmarinen forge a large iron rake and took it to the river of the underworld to recover him, but he had been dismembered. Once she sewed them together and applied balm on them, Lemminkäinen was resurrected.

The Japanese deity Ōkuninushi was burned to death by the Yaso-gami with a large stone heated with fire only to be

resurrected by the power of his mother goddess and other goddesses. When Ōkuninushi's grieving mother consulted the celestial deity Kami-musubi, she sent Kisagai-hime and Umugi-hime to resurrect him. Kisagai-hime grinded seashells to collect their powder, which Umugi-hime applied on his burn to resemble mother milk. When Ōkuninushi was killed for the second time, his mother goddess again rescued and resurrected him helping him flee to Irune-no-katasu-kuni where Susanoo resided.

Both Lemminkäinen and Ōkuninushi were resurrected either through a life-giving balm or mother's milk. Furthermore, both were revived as a result of their concerned mothers or goddesses who heard of their wishes. It is the same as when the Gigas were given immortality by taking the essence of the miracle food Gaia had produced. Both represent the reproductive power of the earth goddesses.

Both Lemminkäinen and Ōkuninushi went through many hardships before dying and being resurrected. This likely represents the rites of passage into adulthood. Coming of age rituals occurred when the souls of adolescents died to be reborn into those of adults. This, too, embodies the theme of death and rebirth. There was always the help of their mother goddesses likely because there was an idea that without the protection of the great vitality of females rooted in the earth, a hero could not fulfill his duties.

### **Trees and caves**

The idea that life is born from the earth, returns to it, and will be reborn from it, and in this way life is eternal was expressed in many mythological stories of death and rebirth, and in the ancient world, it was imaged in the form of trees and caves.

A tree grows out from the ground and grows, maintaining a long life on the earth; and even if it dies, it will also sprout the next generation, thus keeping that life. It symbolized the eternal nature as well as the death and rebirth of life on the earth.

The ancient people of Northern Europe speak of the world tree Yggdrasil in the traditional myth Edda (the Sayings of Grímnir, 3-135). Under this holy tree with its high canopy is the ground, and its three roots extend deep into the underworld (Miðgarðr). These roots are entangled with countless snakes of Miðgarðr, which are the sources of life. Both snakes and trees represented death and rebirth. People constantly found revelations in this sacred tree.

The Greeks would pray to the laurel of Apollon in Delphi to solicit guidance, and in Dodona, people would pray to oak trees of Zeus. The ancient Celtic druids of ancient Celts also received an oracle from the oak trees.

Christmas trees in Europe originated from the Germanic reverence for trees preceding Christianity. They decorated evergreen trees on the winter solstice where the sun would die to be reborn because trees were a symbol of regeneration and eternal life. They were later integrated into Christianity and came to become the tree for celebrating the birth of Jesus from Virgin Mary. In addition, the belief that Jesus was crucified and resurrected after death is deeply related with this tree worship. Maypoles, too, represented a similar prayer for rebirth.

Similarly, caves symbolized death and rebirth as well as eternal life. That is why caves were used as burial sites in various parts of the world. It was believed that the dead would return to the womb of Mother Earth through a cave, an entrance to the underworld, to be reborn from there.

One version of the birth of Jesus states that he was born from the Virgin Mary not in a stable in Bethlehem but in a cave based on the ancient faith before Christianity. There existed a belief that a child was born as that of a virgin spirit from a cave i.e. the womb of the earth.

## Cycle

On this earth, above all, vegetation grows, among which animals roam, and humans live with these animals and vegetation. And all these beings that were born from the earth

will return to it, and the cycle continues on. On this earth, there was a chain of life and connectedness between vegetations, animals, and humans. The spiritual power and vitality of the earth leave the earth, go through all living things, and return to the earth. This is repeated forever. The ancient people firmly believed in this eternal recurrence of life, this eternal cycle. No matter how the things that exist in this world may change, the invisible life force of the universe is preserved in this endless cycle.

It was believed that in this eternal cycle of life, time, too, would recur. Time was thought to constantly return to the origin to be reborn and form a circle like the changing of four seasons and waxing and waning of the moon, rather than the modern view of a horizontal forward movement. The cuckoo that told of the arrival of early summer in the outskirts of a village last year will come again this year to sing the same song of early summer again. All plants follow the same cycle, bearing flowers and fruits without fail. The sun, too, always appears from behind the same mountain each year, be it the winter solstice or the summer solstice. All things repeat and recur.

The story of the Greek god of time Cronus swallowing his own children, too, tells of the circularity of time. Time has the power to both create and nullify everything. Kali of India was imagined as a goddess of creation as well as a terrifying goddess of destruction that would destroy and consume everything because she was also a goddess of time. Time nullifies everything to return it to the primordial chaos from which all will be created again. Kali represents the very production and an eternal flow. All things are born from it and disappear into it to repeat the eternal cycle. Here, existence is reduced to creation. Life is death, and death is life.

The stories of creation, fertility, death, rebirth, and circulation told by the many myths of earth goddesses also speak symbolically of the rebirth and circulation of the primordial life of the universe, while also representing the eternal nature of the cosmic life. In short, they seek to elucidate the eternal life of the

universe itself, symbolically speaking of the regeneration and circulation of the fundamental life of the universe. Our deaths mean nothing other than a return to the cosmic life. Both our bodies and souls return to the cosmic life through death to be reborn. The sentiment of returning to oneness with this primordial life of the universe is what religion has sought after ever since its dawn.

(Source: Michinori Kobayashi 〈Philosophy of Life Collection〉 (小林道憲 〈生命の哲学〉 コレクション) 4, Minerva Shobō, 2016, Kyoto, in "What is Religion? (宗教とは何か)" Chapter 2)