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Issue 50, Yule 10,010th year of the Goddess

(Winter 2010)

The Beltane Papers exists to provide women with a safe place within which to explore and express the sacred in their lives, to educate, empower, encourage and entertain, to inspire, support and reinforce their exploration of the divine. Published 3 times annually. All rights revert. ISSN # 1074-3634.

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Guiding Goddess: Frau Holle, Hel, Frigga, most ancient goddess... With spindle in hand you teach us to spin the threads of life and weave them in to the fabrics of our lives. It is a grand tapestry that we take part in, each of us a single thread, weaving in and out of probabilities and choices. You give us direction as Ariadne, leaving a thread for us to follow through this labyrinth; you walk with us through the darkest parts, reminding us of our strength to face our fears. You are there at the end of our thread of life, to comfort and console us as the thread is cut, reminding us that our thread will once again start.. Blessed be

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The Beltane Papers

A Journal of Women's Mysteries

Yule (Winter) 10,010th (2010) year of the Goddess Issue 50 - \$3.50



"Time, The Eternal Crone" by Kiri ØSTERGAARD

About the Cover Artist

The creative musings of Kiri Ostergaard (Born 1984 in Denmark) incorporate influences of the natural, the magical mindset of a child and the often macabre Scandinavian folklore. Her main tool of trade is traditional artwork created with coloured pencils, although she does at times delve into digital art as well as some acrylics painting. Aiming to one day make a living as a children's book illustrator, she is currently a student at Pratt Institute of Art in New York where she is pursuing a BFA in Fine Arts, Drawing. You can view more of her wonderful artwork on her website at: <http://www.wicked-fairytale.com>

About this issue...



We've printed once again, late, I know, but we did it! I take all the blame for this issue being late. As you can tell by now, my life is a series of interrupted interruptions. All of us volunteers have had some major changes in our lives this season, rearrangements of family and such. But even with all this, we have a lovely issue. It is the season of the witch, the crone. We have renowned authors such as Max Dashu and Glenys Livingstone as well as authors new to us.

We are also thrilled to introduce two new artists, Kiri Ostergaard, the artist providing the splendid cover art "Time, The Eternal Crone", and Mickie Mueller whose beautiful statue of the Maiden-Mother-Crone compliments Glenys' article on page 18. It is also the holiday season, please consider buying from our advertisers; we are community so let's support each other.

As always, thank you for your continued support of TBP.

Lise Quinn

Getting to know each other

Editor's note: This column is usually for reader introductions, but this issue we will introduce our readers' ghosts!

The Shelter Spirits

I have always been raised to believe in the existence of entities, energies and phenomenon that are outside the realm of 'ordinary reality' I believe that having been given that open mindedness in my upbringing set the stage for my ability to sense spirits, energies and entities. Having said that I'd like to quickly add that I know many individuals who were not brought up with such acceptance and who are yet very gifted psychics and sensitives.

Perhaps my most intimate relationship I've had the opportunity to develop with the spirit world was during the years I worked as a Youth Advocate/ House manager at a shelter for homeless and runaway youth. The shelter was housed in a Victorian townhouse that had been built in 1874. Over the early years the house was home to well to do businessmen who worked downtown. From the 49's until the late 60's it had been split up into a 4plex, in a neighborhood that over those years was known for drug use and Bohemian lifestyle. Since 1970 it has housed the Youth Shelter.

Given its long history especially the transient years, the house held a lot of energy. Being a temporary home for troubled youth added its own rather intense energy. There have always been a few constants in the house. These stories have been reported by staff who had not heard others experiences first. The most commonly agreed upon sensations or images were of a few specific characters, each of whom was described in detail by several individuals who encountered them. One of the most significant, and probably the most "at home" ghost was an older woman who would spend the night fussing and working in the kitchen. When people went into the kitchen at night they usually reported a feeling of being unwelcome there, but not in a threatening way; more like a busy grandma shooshing the kids out of her way so she could work. When a friend and I investigated we got the message that she was very attached to role as a housekeeper and felt that she needed to be there to keep things in proper order.

The other most commonly encountered ghost was that of a young girl, maybe about 10 years old. She would hang out on the third floor most frequently; it was a relatively quiet area with only a couple of administrative offices. Her room and I believe it was once her room was one of the most well preserved Victorian style, flowered wallpaper, and a few antiques. There were also some dolls in the room. She would sometimes venture to the second floor at night which housed the residents' bedrooms and a small office for the overnight staff. Most people got the impression that she had died in the



house from some childhood illness and she was staying because it was the only home she'd ever known. Funny thing, several people got the feeling that she would ask for chocolate when she encountered an adult. Her footsteps could often be heard in the hallway and on the large staircase leading downstairs.

There are many more stories I could tell, but they would probably be enough to fill a book. These were the two most familiar and most "friendly" spirits and they really felt like part of the 'family' which is why I chose their stories to tell. One more thing I never figured it out for sure, but I kind of like to think the Kitchen Grandma was hanging around to care for the little girl. Although it seems sad to me for spirits to be stuck, it's rather comforting that there was a caring bond that kept them together.

~ Jenny Hazard

.....

H.P. Lovecraft was inspired to set some of his stories in the remote hills of Vermont, in the same area where my great-grandparents bought 140 acres of land and an old farmhouse that was built as a stage stop in the 1800s. I grew up knowing this farmhouse as my home away from home. I loved roaming the woods, dipping into the nearby rivers, and staring in wonder at the vast number of stars visible in the country sky. I also loved the house – with affection for its rustic qualities, its lack of hot running water and at times, lack of a working toilet (it did have an outhouse, for use when necessary!).

There were some spooky things about it... The stove was an old pot-belly that had to be disassembled each time a visit ended, the parts hidden away in secret compartments in the stairs to the attic (this was because at one point, someone had broken in and stolen the previous stove, piece by piece, through a window). The idea of attic stairs that lifted up to reveal secret compartments seems pretty neat now, even practical, but back then simply added an old-fashioned mystery to the house. The cellar was short ceilinged, with a dirt floor and giant stones that created the foundation. Upon arriving for a visit, the electricity had to be turned on by going into that cellar and fiddling with antique glass fuses. It meant walking through the dark, shuttered, creaky house, finding one's way down the old stairs, straight into the middle of the cellar. The tall house sat alone, looming over the dirt road that was not much older than the house itself.

Though I loved the house dearly, it did at times feel creepy. When several families of us cousins would visit at a time, the energy was alive and cheerful, but when only a handful of people came to stay, it seemed pensive, at best. On one occasion, I and my boyfriend at the time (who is now my husband of twenty years), arrived at the house in the middle of winter for a visit we had planned with my

brother and his girlfriend. They were to join us later. We cleared snow from the doorway, turned the electricity on, got a good fire going in the woodstove, settled our things, and lay down for a quick rest.

The fire in the stove warmed the place to a high of probably eighty degrees. We both fell asleep on cots set up in the living room, dozing drowsily and unexpectedly, and woke to the distinct sound of keys in the front door. Jumping up to greet my brother and his girlfriend, we were surprised when the door did not open, and around us was silent. My boyfriend reached for his glasses, which he had placed on the floor by his cot when he lay down, and could not find them. I joined him in the search, and finally found them clear across the room, past my cot. On the floor, but certainly out of anyone's reach.

We both checked the door. It was still locked, and it was clear there had been no one there. At that point we were getting a little spooked. The sound we had both heard was the exact, familiar sound of the key in the door. The glasses were inexplicably found fully across the room. The gentle silence of winter surrounding us was little comfort. Shaking the feeling, we decided to start dinner and wait for their arrival. As my boyfriend stood at the stove, stirring, I sat by the still-shuttered window, just talking together easily, when we suddenly heard a loud, deep scraping sound. I jumped up, heart racing, he stopped stirring, and we looked at each other, trying to figure out what had caused the sound. Our first thought – trying to be rational, was that an animal had pulled on the outside shutter. Seemed unlikely, but a possible rational explanation. The shutters were closed whenever anyone left after a visit, and they were held tightly in place by strong hooks. My boyfriend went outside in the deep snow to take a look... no tracks, no sign of an animal anywhere around the side of the house. Our second thought was perhaps a boulder had slipped loose in the cellar; it certainly would have made a loud scraping noise. We both went to look, and found nothing out of place there either. When we came back to the kitchen we both felt our nerves growing on edge quickly, and when we tried to get back to what we had been doing, we simply looked at each other and knew... I don't remember which of us said it first, but we had both strongly felt the message, "Get out." It was as if each event had been trying to tell us what suddenly formed as a message in both of our minds.

At that point, we started hurrying to clean up the uneaten dinner. As we did so, the feeling intensified and it wasn't until we had driven away that we started to feel better. It was before the time of cell phones, and the town we were in had no pay phones, so it wasn't until we checked into a motel many miles away that we were able to call my brother and his girlfriend. They had not been able to travel north, as something had come up, and of course, had no way of reaching us.

Nellie Levine is a writer and artist living in northern Vermont. She can be found online at www.northernskystudio.com and www.fionnmara.com

Our house was built in the 1890s by a polygamist whose leg is buried somewhere on the property after being amputated. After he died it was bought by a family who raised their 11 children in the small bedroom, upstairs. The children of our house and those of neighboring farms carved their initials on the outside brick walls of the kitchen.

The children grew to adulthood, leaving home. Their parents grew old and one dark night while crossing the highway after attending church, were both hit and killed. The young drivers, playing ‘chicken’, had been racing with their headlights turned off. They had no warning of the old couple crossing the street – only felt tha-thump as their cars smashed into something. Wondering what they’d hit, they were horrified to discover the decapitated body of an old woman. Neighbors had told us of that night and how in the morning, dogs were found feasting on more remains but rather than calling anyone, they quietly buried the parts along the highway.

Considering the gory deaths of the long time owners of our property, you'd think ghostly visitations would be a given but I can honestly say I only remember one – in July of 1998.

A beautiful day, I had gone outside to walk around in the backyard when I felt as if a wispy something was cir-

cling me – getting underfoot. Whatever it was wanted me to walk over to the kitchen’s brick wall. It almost felt as if I was being dragged along by a child, holding my hand. In my head I could hear “That’s me! That’s me!”

I'd never paid close attention to the wall of our house but the small child beside me was anxious for me to notice something. Slowly, I realized that all along the brick wall were carved initials and names. My little friend was most proud of "M. C. A." I felt compelled to reach forward, tracing over it with a fingertip. "That's me! That's me!" I sensed again. Smiling, I walked back into the house, thinking "What an imagination I have!"

Hours passed and while participating in some neighborhood gossip later that afternoon, I was surprised by “Did you hear Milt Abrams had a heart attack and died when he crashed his car into Dave’s garage this morning?” I walked back outside, traced the “M.C.A.” carved in the brick one last time, thinking “Good bye, Milt.”

Years later, a friend suggested, “You should tell Ross – he and Milt had a pact that whichever one died first would come back and tell the other about the afterlife.” Both were librarians at Utah State University. He went on to tell me, one day as a practical joke, Ross wired Milt’s office with a speaker and waited for him to come to work. As Milt sat, unsuspecting, he heard: “Milt, Milt – I died last night and want you to know that there is an afterlife.” Milt ran out from his office only to be met by his staff and a laughing friend. In a way, I feel I helped Milt have the last laugh – and deliver on his promise.

I also knew Ross, but not how to approach the subject. While walking through a hallway, I noticed Ross and his wife coming from the opposite direction. As they passed I said “Ross, Milt wants you to know there’s an afterlife.” Ross shot me a puzzled look and the color drained from his wife’s face as they walked past to their next class. Later, I was able to tell him the details. He smiled, nodded his head and said “Yes!”

We've had other ghostly experiences in other homes but this one is my favorite. I feel like Milt was lost when he suddenly died so his spirit instinctively returned to where he was safe – his childhood home. I don't know why he chose to be a child when he 'appeared' to me – or if he had a choice. All I know is that Milt's sweet, childish spirit was welcomed that day. I'll cherish it always.

Mary Ann Hubbell lives in “The Abrams house,” an old log cabin with a built on brick kitchen in College Ward, Utah. For years, the living Abrams have dropped by to visit and share family tales – including Milt, before he died. The Hubbells always take time to show them around and share the story of the day Milt died. They seem to cherish the tale and each take time to trace his initials.

The Crone

"I AM THE SILENCE OF MIDNIGHT,
AND BLACK VELVET SKIES.

I AM THE SHADOW OF VISION
THAT TEMPERS YOUR EYES.

I AM THE DARKNESS OF SECRETS
THAT DRAW THE VEIL THIN,
THE COLDNESS OF WINTER THAT
SHAKES ON YOUR SKIN.

I AM GRANDMOTHER, WEAVER, EN-
CHANTRESS AND CRONE.

THE KNOWLEDGE OF JUSTICE THAT
STRIKES AT THE BONE.

DESTRUCTION IS MINE WHEN ITS TIME COMES TO
BE:

DEATH TO THE LIVING, WHO ALL COME TO ME.

MINE IS THE HAND OF THE SPINNING OF FATES.
MINE IS THE PASSAGE BETWEEN LIFE'S FRAGILE
GATES.

I AM THE GIVER OF MAGICKAL SIGHT,
THE SLIGHT SLIVER OF WANING MOONLIGHT.

I AM THE BRANCH OF AGELESS WORN TREES.
HEAR MY VOICE AND KNOW ME!

I AM THE RAVEN THAT FLIES THROUGH THE WOODS,
BLACK SILKEN WINGS OPENED UP TO THE SKY!



BEARER OF CLOSURE, COM-
PETITION, AND TRUTH
DREAMSCAPES AND BANSHEE
AM I!

MINE IS THE WISDOM THAT
COMES IN THE DARK.

MINE IS THE DYING THAT CALLS
TO YOUR FLESH.

MINE ARE THE HIDDEN REMAINS
OF YOUR HEART.

MINE IS THE MIST THAT WILL TAKE
YOUR LAST BREATH.

GIVE UNTO ME WHAT IS OLD AND OUTWORN,
AND I WILL RETURN IT WITH NEW LIFE REBORN.
GIVE ME YOUR SORROWS, YOUR SADNES, YOUR
GRIEF.

AND IN THE DARK HOUR, I WILL GIVE THEE RELIEF!

I AM THE GIVER OF DEATH AND REBIRTH,
MINE ARE THE LAST THINGS, BEFORE THEY ARE
FIRST.

SEE ME IN THE SHADOWS, AND IN THE DARK SEA.

I AM THE CRONE!
HEAR MY VOICE AND KNOW ME!"

--AUTHOR UNKNOWN

THE OLD GODDESS

Excerpt from the SECRET HISTORY OF THE WITCHES by Max Dashu

The Old Goddess of the pagans lived on in popular speech, in rituals of hearth and earth, in festival custom with its cargo of symbol and myth. She was still seen as the source of life power and wisdom. People prayed to her for well-being, abundance, protection, and healing. They invoked her in birth, and the dead returned to her (especially the unbaptized) and moved in her retinue. They said that the Old Goddess rode the winds, causing rain and snow and hail on earth, and that she revealed omens of weather and deaths and other momentous things to come.

Across Europe, Friday was observed as her holy day, beginning with its eve on Thursday night. The dark of the year was sacred to Old Goddess. On winter solstice nights, she was said to fly over the land with her spirit hosts. Tradition averred that shamanic witches rode in her wake on the great pagan festivals, along with the ancestral dead.

Reverence was made to Old Goddess in planting and harvesting, baking, spinning and weaving. The fateful Spinner was worshipped as Holle or Perchta by the Germans, as Mari by the Basques, and as Laima by the Lithuanians and Latvians. She appears as Befana in Italy and as myriad faery goddesses in France, Spain, and the Gaeltacht. In Serbia she is Srecha; in Russia she is Mokosh or Kostroma or the apocryphal saint Paraska.

I call her the Old Goddess because she was commonly pictured as an aged woman, and her veneration was ancient. While the goddesses of the various ethnic cultures have their unique qualities, they share certain traits, some international deep root of commonality. Old Goddess is like the weathered Earth, ancestor of all, an immanent presence in forests, grottos and fountains. In her infinitude she manifests in countless forms, as females of various ages and shapeshifting to tree, serpent, frog, bird, deer, mare and other creatures. In the middle ages and even under the downpour of diabolism during the Burning Terror, she remained beloved by the common people.

Holle was already described as a witch goddess in the 9th century Corrector Burchardi, which rebuked the belief that shamanic women rode animals through the skies in her

company in the dark of night. Many centuries later, these beliefs were still current. Holle was said to head a wild cavalcade of spirits, witches and the dead, especially in the dark of the year.



"Frigga Spinning the Clouds" by J.C. Dollman

At Giessen her visits were anticipated in a proverbial saying: *Die Holle kommt*. "The Holle comes" in storms, riding the winds. German peasants said that witches fared to Holle's sacred mountain on the old holydays. [Rüttner-Cova, 150, compares Holle's journey to Hexenfahrten (the travelling of witches).]

Her name means "the beneficent one." Holle protects the hearth and watches over the distaff and flax baskets placed near it. Her gifts—coal, wood, flax pods—seem insignificant but turn out to have unimagined value.

Holle creates whirlwinds and snowfall. She brings life-force to the land, causing growth, abundance and good fortune. Her yearly circling of the fields brings rich crops. Hulda and her Seligen ("happy ones") roam across the land where flax will be planted. [Pocs, 74] According to Alberus, the women travelling in Hulda's host carried sickles. [Grimm, 476] Such myths reflect actual rituals blessing the flax fields, like the Slovenian ceremonies in honor of the Mittwinterfrau, another form of the Old Goddess. [Pocs, 76]

In lower Saxony, Harke or frau Harke flies over the fields as a dove, making them fruitful. [Grimm, 1364. He notes that a folktale presents Harke as a witch's daughter.] Holle also shapeshifts into a frog to retrieve the red apple of life from a well. [Gimbutas, *Language of the Goddess*, 255] As the Haulemutter of the Harz mountains, she has the power to become huge or tiny. She is a shaggy-haired, hump-backed old woman who walks with a crutch.

Holle also appears as a young woman bathing in the midday sun, combing her hair or playing enchantingly beautiful music. A young woman with a crown of candles impersonated her on winter holiday. Or she was dressed in straw, flanked by women with sickles. More often, though, Holle is a fateful crone goddess who initiates young woman and rewards them according to their merits. She is especially

pleased with compassion and generosity.

The folktale of Frau Holle's Well takes up this theme. A mistreated stepdaughter was made to spin til blood ran from her fingers. She went to wash the spindle in the well, and it fell in. The cruel stepmother told her she had to go in and get it out. The girl jumped into the well and lost consciousness. She awoke in a beautiful sunny meadow full of flowers. She began to walk and soon came to an oven full of baking bread. The oven called out to her, asking her to take out the loaves before they burned. She willingly complied. Then she came to a tree loaded with ripe apples. It asked her to shake them down, and she did that too.

At last the girl came to a cottage where an old woman with big teeth sat looking out at her. The girl was afraid at first, but the crone reassured her. She asked her to stay with her and help around the house, especially to shake her down comforter so that the feathers flew, causing snow on earth. "I'm Frau Holle."

The girl stayed with the old woman and led a comfortable life with plenty of good food. But after a while she became homesick. Frau Holle offered to take her back to her world. She led the stepdaughter under a big gate, which showered down gold that stuck to her. Walking through the gate, the girl saw she was not far from her house. She returned to her family and told them the whole story.

When her stepsister saw how Frau Holle had treated her, she decided to also pay a visit to the world under the well. She passed through the same cycle of events, but refused to take the bread out of the magical oven or to shake the apple tree, and avoided work at Holle's cottage. When she passed through the gate, she was drenched with tar. [Grimm's GFT]

The plunge into a magical well, the old woman deep in the earth, the apple tree in the abundant land, the bread that the faeries bake—these are old animist images. Holle's quilt whose feathers become snow is linked with the old tales of Goosefoot Bertha and Mother Goose. A Welsh proverb says: "When snow falls people say, 'The old woman is feathering her geese,' or 'Mother Goose is moulting,' or 'The goose-mother is feathering her nest.'" [Trevelyan, 119]

The Goose Mother appears in another Grimm tale, as an old wisewoman living in a mountain forest with her flock of geese. Great age did not prevent her from working energetically. She walked around gathering up huge bundles of grass and fruit and carried them home on her back. She called out cheerful greetings but some people mistrusted her. Fathers warned their sons, "Watch out for the old woman; she's a sly one and a witch." [Grimm's GFT, 575]

Like Frau Holle, the wisewoman took in a misunderstood daughter. This one's father had disowned her after she told him that she loved him as much as food loves salt. He cast her off for filial ingratitude. The old woman took her in as a goosegirl, disguising her with gray hair and a false skin that

FRIDAY GODDESS OF THE WITCHES

Andra Mari - Euskadi / Basques

Laima - Lithuania, Latvia

Nicniven, Gyre Carline - Scotland

Hulda - Denmark

Holle, Holda, Fraw Holt - north Germany

Perchta, Perhta Baba, Zlata Baba - south Germany, Austria

Fraw Saelde, Zälti - Austria

Luca, Szepasszony - Hungary

Saint Friday - Estonia

Mokosh / Paraskeva - Russia

Dame Habonde, Abundia - France

Befana (Epiphania) - Sicily

Signora Oriente, Diana, Signora del gioco, Sapiante Sibillia - Italy

sloughed off. One day the old woman talked a noble youth into carrying her load for her. He was barely able to pick it up, much less carry it for miles, but she shamed him into it. At last he decided to put it down in spite of her mockery and found that he was unable to. The young aristocrat was forced to trudge on under the magical burden. Toward the journey's end, the crone jumped on top of the load and rode him home.

After he was at last free of her, the count's son noticed the goosegirl washing off her disguise at the spring. To make a long story short, he wanted to marry her and led her remorseful parents to the goosegirl. The old woman gave her cottage to her, and it turned into a fantastic, abundantly provisioned palace. In this story, the Goose goddess shapes destiny, brings about justice, and bestows good fortune.

Divine Spinners

The earliest known sources show the Old Goddess as a spinner. She is Fate, whose spinning has immense creative force in time and space. A Finnish kenning for the sun — "God's Spindle" — reflects her power. [Kalevala, 32, 20, in Grimm, 1500] The Goddess's spinning and weaving also "symbolize the creation of matter, especially of human flesh." [Matossian, 120]

There are countless avatars of the spinning goddess: Mari of the Basques, Holle of Germany, Laima of Lithuania and Latvia, Mokosh of Russia, the old Frankish Berthe Pedauque, They include local fatas such as Tante Arie in French Switzerland, Habetrot in Britain, and the Wendish Pshi-Polnitsa.

Among the Greeks, the spinner Fates are threefold, the

ancient, mighty Moirae. This triunity is repeated in innumerable folk traditions all over medieval and early modern Europe. French peasants of Saintonge said that the *fades* (fates) or *bonnes* (“good women”) roamed in the moonlight as three old women, always carrying distaffs and spindles. The fades had prophetic powers and cast lots. They were seen along the banks of the Charente river, or near certain grottos, or near megalithic monuments. [Michon, *Statistique de la Charente*, in Sebillot I 444]

In Berry, a white faery carrying a distaff was said to walk on certain nights at the edge of an old mardelle called Spinner’s Hole. Three pale ladies spun their distaffs by the Faeries’ Rock near Langres. A spinner could be heard at Villy, but was only seen at dawn or dusk. [Sebillot, *Metiers*, 23-4] Portuguese women made offerings to faeries whose name shows its derivation from “the dianas”:

In the Algarve the memory is not extinct of female creatures called jās or jans, for whom it used to be customary to leave a skein of flax and a cake of bread on the hearth. In the morning the flax would be spun as fine as hair and the cake would have disappeared. [Gallop, 58]

Women in western France made similar offerings. In the Landes, women placed fine flax at the entrance of caves or the edge of fountains inhabited by the hades, who instantly turned it into thread.

It was once believed that the faeries would come to the aid of spinners who implored them; in Upper Bretagne, if buttered bread and a flax doll was placed at the entrance to one of their grottos, the next day it would be found very well spun in the same place. [Sebillot, *Metiers*, 23-4]

Even in the far north, in a very different cultural world, the spinning wheel was sacred to the spring goddess of the Saami. She is the spirit maiden Rana Nedie, who makes the mountains green and feeds the reindeer. When sacrifices were made to her, they rubbed the blood on a spinning wheel and leaned it against her altar. [find cite]

The spinning faeries are often encountered near water. A Welsh faery woman would emerge from Corwrion Pool to spin on beautiful summer days, singing to herself, “Sili ffrit, sili ffrit...” Another tale says a faery used to borrow things from a Llyn farmwoman, but wouldn’t give her name. Once she borrowed a spinning wheel. The woman overheard her singing while spinning, “Little did she know/ That Sili go Dwt/ Is my name.” [Rhys II, 584, compares Silly Frit and Sili go Dwt with the Scottish seelie (591) as in “seelie wights,” helpful faeries.]

The border Scots revered Habetrot as the goddess of spinners. She is seen near water, usually by a “holey” stone that is a gateway to the Otherworld. Habetrot appears as a helper and initiator of girls, bringing good fortune to them. It was said that “a shirt made by her was a sovereign remedy for all sorts of diseases.” [Briggs, 216] (More on her in another

installment.)

Another spinning water faery was the Loireag. Warping, weaving, and washing of webs were her sacraments, and she saw to it that women followed the traditions. Singing was one of them, and it had to be melodious. A modern source dismisses the Loireag as “a small mite of womanhood that does not belong to this world but to the world thither” and “a plaintive little thing, stubborn and cunning.” [from Carmichael’s *Carmina Gadelica*, in Briggs, 271]

Scottish faery lore is full of spinning and weaving. The Gyre-Carling, queen of the “good neighbors” (faery folk) oversaw the work of spinners in Fife. [Briggs, 325] The faeries could sometimes be heard chanting waulking songs: Ho! fir-e! fair-e, foirm! Ho! Fair-eag-an an cló! (“Well done, grand, bravo the web!”). Border Scots believed in the thrumpin, a fateful guardian with the power to take life, or Thrummy-cap, a faery wearing a hat made of wool that weavers clipped from the ends of their webs. [Evans-Wentz, 395]

The French said that faery divinities came to houses to spin on certain nights. An Alsatian ballad pictured them as three fates: “When midnight sounds / not a soul in the village awake / Then three spectres glide in the window/and sit at the three wheels / They spin, their arms moving silently / the threads hum rapidly onto the spindles...” As they finish, an owl cries from the cemetery, “What will become of the fine fabric/ and will there again be three engagement robes?” [Sebillot, M, 15]

Spring gossamer was often explained as the craft of faeries. An Italian saying—“See how much the three Marias have spun tonight”—substitutes a Christian name for the old triune goddess. [Grimm, 1533] The sacraments of spinning and weaving were transferred to certain saints: Germana of Bar-sur-Aube; Lucie of Sampigny, whose stone helped women conceive; and Genovefa of Brabant, who was said to sit behind the altar at the Frauenkirchen (“women’s church”) where the buzz of her spinning wheel could be heard. [Eckenstein, 25-6]

Spinning faeries often appear to help out children burdened with work. A Manx servant girl asked the spiders to help her with a load of spinning. Not only did they spin her wool, but they wove her a gorgeous shawl out of their own thread. [Briggs, 138] In a Swiss Romande tale, a girl’s parents made her spin a full distaff, and herd the cattle too. “One day a fee came to ask her hospitality in her chalet, and having been well received, she came every evening to take her distaff, put it in the horns of one of the cows that was going to pasture, then, sitting on the brave beast’s back, she began to spin by moonlight, for the benefit of her protégée, and each morning she returned her distaff filled with skeins of beautiful fine thread.” [Sebillot, M, 23]

German legend is full of spinning and weaving women,” as Grimm pointed out. They make magical mantles or other

clothing, like “the robe that a wild faery (*wildiu feine*) span.” A Westphalian tradition says, “in the cave sits an old spinster...” This cavern-dweller prophesies to those who seek her advice. The elves, too, are often described as weavers. [Grimm, 1402, 407, 447]

The Swedish hill troll Dame Soåsan was also associated with the spinster’s craft. “To those who were careful not to offend her the woman exhibited much kindness and extended many favors.” She helped a starving old woman by offering her flax to spin. But she laid a condition: the woman should not wet the thread with spittle, since she had been christened. The old spinner left the yarn in a glade and received silver pieces in return. She prospered, until she stopped keeping faith with the trolls and wet the thread with her spit. Then she got lost in the woods, and when she returned home, all her silver had turned to pebbles. [Booss, 254-6]

In a Norwegian folk tale, a girl goes in quest to find a prince who lives “East of the Sun and West of the Moon.” She ascends a mountain, “where an old woman was sitting and spinning on a golden spinning wheel.” She lends the girl a horse, gives her a golden spinning wheel, and advises her to ask the east wind for help. [Booss, 63-70]

An old Estonian tradition says that Vana-ema (Old Mother) will spin all night if you leave out a distaff and thread. In some districts Estonians called this spinner the Grandmother or the Night Mother. She was connected to the dead and the underworld spinning women (*maa-aluste* naised). [Matossian, 121] Estonian peasants used to explain the strange ticking sound of wall moths as the spinning of the Twilight Mother.

The old women said that if you wake up at night and upon awakening hear that something is purring in the corner, then you should try to put your hand on it; then the twilight mother’s spinning wheel will stop and her power to work will stay in your hand; if someone was an excellent spinner, it was said that she had touched the twilight mother’s spinning wheel. [Loorits, 1948, 62, in Paulson, 149]

The megalithic sanctuaries built by the elder kindreds of

Europe remained an enduring presence on the landscape in the wake of invasions and migrations, long after the peoples who built them were submerged in the ethnic tide. The ancient lore surrounding the great stone monuments became mixed with new religions and stories, but retained its emphasis on powerful women and goddesses. In medieval Europe these sacred stories survived as the fairy faith, where female deities and land spirits mix with the ancestral dead.

International folk tradition credits the faeries with raising dolmens and other megalithic monuments. These accounts laid great emphasis on the builders’ power as spinners, typically saying that a fata or goddess or lady carried the giant stones on her head while walking and spinning.

An old Aragonese legend of the Dalle Morisca said that “a woman appeared who spun with her distaff and carried the great horizontal stone of the dolmen on her head. As she reached the place where the dolmen of Rodellar now stands, she set the stone in the position in which she had carried it.” [Gari Lacruz, 287] In Portugal, a spinning moura carried the wonderfully carved Pedra Formosa of Citania de Briteiros. [Gallop, 77]

The Basques named a dolmen at Mendive after the *lamiñas*. One of them brought the capstone from faraway Armigue balanced on her head, spinning as she went. In some versions she carried the boulder on her little finger. [Sebillot IV 21] The goddess Holle also carried off a boulder on her thumb, according to Germans of the Meisner district. [Grimm] Another Basque tradition says that the witches built dolmens in a single night, carrying stones from the mountains on the tips of their distaffs. [Barandiaran, 173]

This theme of “one night’s work” recurs in Irish traditions of megaliths built by the *Cailleach* (crone). The Maltese also tell it of their ancient temples. A woman with a baby at her breast is said to have created the oldest of them, the *Ggantija*. “Strengthened by a meal of magic beans, she is said to have taken the huge blocks of stone to the site in a single day, and then to have built the walls by night.” [von Cles-Reden, 78] The *Ggantija* is on Gozo island, which Greek tradition called the island of Calypso, daughter of

The Ggantija



Oceanus. The Maltese still point out her cave below Ggantija, which an 18th century writer describes as a labyrinth. [Biaggi, 13-14]

A dolmen in Devon was called The Spinners' Rock. English tradition says that three spinning women erected the megalith one morning before breakfast, amusing themselves on the way to deliver wool they had spun. [Stone Pages, joshua.micronet.it/untesti/dmeozzi/homeng.html, 6-97] Dous Fadas, a dolmen on the road from Clermont to Puy in Auvergne, was named after fées who spun as they carried its stones. In the Dordogne valley three young women elevated the standing stones of Brantôme with their distaffs. In the upper Loire valley three spinning fées carried stones on their heads to build the dolmens at Langeac. [Sebillot IV 21]

The French folklorist Sebillot noted that many menhirs are shaped like distaffs or loaded spindles. They were said to have been put in place by supernatural spinners. [Sebillot, 5] In 1820 peasants near Simandre in Ain told a researcher that the Spindle of the Faery Woman, a great standing stone, had been placed there by la Fau who carried it in her arms. It was the only one left of three menhirs planted in the ground by three fées on their way to a gathering. [Tardy, *Le Menhir de Simandre*, 1892, cited in Sebillot IV, 6]

At Rocquaine on the island of Guernsey a woman of very small stature was seen climbing the cliff beyond the beach, knitting and carrying something in her apron as carefully as if it was a dozen eggs or a newborn. She suddenly stopped and, with great ease, hurled a fifteen-foot stone into the plain above. [Sebillot, 7]

The Woman Stone at St Georges-sur-Moulon fell when a giant woman from the Haut-Brune forest was descending the hillside. Her apron-strings broke, releasing the stone she was carrying in it. In Scotland it is a basket-strap that broke as the Cailleach carried earth and stones on her back. They spilled out to form Mount Vaichaird, or the rock piles called Carn na Caillich. The Cailleach shaped the hills of Ross-shire and much of the Scottish highlands by carrying loads in her basket. [MacKenzie, 164]

In Ireland, the Cailleach Bhéara had two sister-hags who were guardians of Kerry peninsulas. Once, when the hag of Beare fell on hard times, the hag of Dingle decided to help her by giving her another island. She roped one of her own and dragged it southward, but it split into two before reaching its destination. [O Hogain, 67] This is reminiscent of the story of Gefjon, who made king Gylfi laugh and was granted the boon of as much land as four oxen could plough in a day and a night. She yoked her giant sons as oxen to a plow and pulled a huge chunk of land into the sea, leaving a huge lake in Sweden. Gefjon named the new island Zeeland.

These tales reach as far as Finland, where giants' daughters carried huge rocks in their aprons and tossed them up near Päjände in Hattulasocken. The Scandinavian merwoman Zechiel and her sister wished to visit each other, and set

about building a bridge of stones across the sea. But they never finished; Zechiel was startled by Thor's thunder, and the enormous stones scattered out of her apron. In Pomerania, a giant's daughter wanted to make a bridge across the sea to the island of Rügen. She brought an apronful of sand, but dropped it when her mother threatened to punish her. The spilled sand became the hills near Litzow. [All Grimm 536-7] A Scottish variant has the devil threatening to take an old Donside witch unless she made him a rope of sand before nightfall. She grinned and did it easily. Later it broke, and its remnants are the low sandhills called the Kembs of Kemnay in Aberdeenshire. [Buchan, 268-9]

In some stories the menhir-carrying lady metamorphosed into the Catholic goddess. In Pléchatel the Holy Virgin was walking along spinning with the Long-Stone on her head and the White-Stones in her apron. She dropped her spindle and when she bent to pick it up, the stone on her head slid off and plunged into the ground just where the spindle had fallen. Meanwhile the stones in her apron rolled out and landed in a pattern of thread coming from the Long-Stone spindle. [Sebillot IV, 7]

Sometimes the only trace of the legend is a place-name. The people of Elbersweiller in Alsace called a local menhir the Distaff in the 1700s, and other German stones were called Kunkel (distaff). The names of some stones show cultural drift away from the original pagan goddess: St Barbe's Spindle, Kriemhild's Spindle, the Distaff of la Madeleine or Gargantua's Wife's Spindle. [Sebillot IV, 5] Saint Lufthildis was said to have marked out her lands with her spindle from her hilltop dwelling, the Lufteberg. [Eckenstein, 25]

Assimilation of saints' names is unsurprising given the long campaign to christianize pagan culture, and the peasantry's refusal to give it up. Under these circumstances a synthesis was inevitable. Strange associations arose when biblical characters were projected into the old faery lore: the strongman Samson was said to have carried the standing stones in the Gaillac region—but while spinning! St Radegonde carried the Standing Stone of Poitiers—with the capstone on her head and the five pillars in her apron—and set it in the ground. In the same way, St Madeleine carried boulders to build a dolmen in an island in the Vienne river. [Sebillot IV, 22-23]

In Aveyron the Virgin carried the boulders of the Peyri-nagols dolmen, one on her head and one on each arm, spinning as she walked. During the trip she filled seven spindles with thread each day. This ancient monument was known as the Holy Rocks. The dolmens of Valderies and Peyrolevado were said to be raised the same way, and they too were eventually credited to the Catholic goddess. [Sebillot IV 22]

Other megaliths of the same type fell under the church's ban, and came to be called Devil's Stone or were otherwise demonized. Yet popular memory kept on connecting the archaic stone temples with the faeries and witches. The Arago-

nese described megalithic sanctuaries as places where witch assemblies took place. They called the dolmen at Ibirque, Aragón, the Witches' Hut; others retained goddess associations. Spanish and Portuguese traditions of supernatural moras at these monuments may allude to their ancient north African origins. [Gari Lacruz, 287-8]

Basques said that the lamiñas (faeries) or sorguiñes (witches) built the dolmens of Mendive, as well as the country's oldest bridges, houses, castles, palaces and even churches. [Barandiarán, 85-6, note] The western Basques often say that devils built the bridges, though they also name the pagans or Moors. Several dolmens are known as Sorguinexte, "witch's house."

In Sardinia the ancient nuraghe were sometimes called Nuraghe Istria, "witch's tower." The witch-goddess Lughia Rajosa lived in one of these neolithic towers. Her enchanted distaff (Rocca fatata) guarded great wealth: herds, thousands of jars of grain and oil. The distaff moved around in the day, while Lughia slept, and whistled to warn her when intruders came. It was told that youths often tried to rob her animals or firewood. She defeated many of them, but one managed to push her magical distaff into the oven. Not knowing how to cry, Lughia turned into innumerable insects who cried for her. Now she flies as a cicada amidst the nuraghe towers. [Fiabe Sarde, 44, 78-81]

A Breton dolmen called the Spinner's Bed was inhabited by a supernatural sorcière. Standing on the stones, if she threw her spindle to the right it reached to mount Roc'h goz in Plestin; when she hurled it to the left it fell at Beg an Inkinerez in Plougasnou, three miles away. Another powerful fée was said to live in a dolmen at Tregastel, called Gouele an Inkinerez, "Bed of the Spinner." This fée was able to hurl her spindle enormous distances, like a shaman projecting her power. [Sebillot IV 28] In the 13th century, an account of an old woman tried as a heretic at Reims described her as throwing a ball of thread in this way, and flying after it like a witch. [Kors/Peters cite]

Sometimes the legend of the building faery was assimilated to historical figures. Maud of Hay, a noblewoman whose husband feuded with king John of Robin Hood fame, was captured, ransomed, captured again, and walled up for life in the king's tower, along with her children. Folklore remembers her by her maiden name, as Mol Walbee. Posthumously she acquired a reputation as a powerful witch. The Welsh said that Mol Walbee singlehandedly built the castle of Hay in Breconshire in one night. As she carried stones in her apron, a nine-foot "pebble" dropped into her shoe. She kept going, but the stone irritated her, so she threw it across the Wye river. It landed three miles away in Llowes churchyard, Radnorshire. The church does not seem to have been an accidental target. In another tale, a monk interrupted Moll's midnight incantations, exhorting her to give them up. She grabbed him, carried him to the Wye and dumped him in the river, where he drowned. [Trevelyan, 129]



La Roche des Fées, Essé

The Mascos built themselves a home at the Cabano de los Mascos near Ceyrac. (The name of these faeries comes from mascae, an ancient word for witches that shows up in early medieval witchcraft laws.) They too carried enormous blocks atop their distaffs. At the Tioule des Fadas, a fada gathered chunks of granite so large that ten bulls would have been unable to budge them, and built a shelter for herself and her sheep. She carried the largest stone on the tip of her distaff, spinning as she walked. [Sebillot, IV 21]

In French accounts the fées bringing stones for their megalithic temples often throw them down haphazardly when they find out that the building was already finished. [Sebillot, IV 7] So it happened with fées carrying stones to the Roche-aux-Fées at Essé. When they heard that no more stones were needed, they stuck one boulder upright and scattered the rest alongside it. Another group of fées, hearing their sister call to them not to bring more stones, let them fall and be buried deep in the earth. [Grimm 413]

One legend has Margot-la-Fée walking along with a stone on her head, knitting, when she spotted a motionless bird on the ground. "So you die in this country?" The answer was yes. "And here I am carrying this stone for a monument—it's not worth the trouble to build." And she threw the rock where it stands today, at Poterie near Lamballe. [Sebillot IV 22]

About the Author: Max is one of the founding mothers of the Women's Spirituality resurgence, and an artist whose paintings re-envision bold and spirited women, pagan sacraments and goddesses around the world (see www.max-dashu.net). Her art has appeared in *Daughters of the Moon Tarot*, in books by Judy Grahn, Diane Stein, and Martha Shelley, and her own *Witch Dream Comix* (1975), as well as many feminist, lesbian, and pagan publications over the years. She is now working on a DVD of her Women's Power slide presentation, and a book on mother-right societies (matrilineal/matrilocal/gender-egalitarian cultures).



Spinning the Thread Weaving the Web

Originally published in the *Sacred Earth* Newsletter by Kat Morgenstern

Deep within the earth womb, below the roots of the cosmic world tree Yggdrasil, the three norns, Urd, Verthandi and Skuld have their dwelling. Also known as 'the fates', they govern the thread of life: Urd (Earth) spins it, Verthandi (Becoming) measures it and Skuld (Fate) cuts it - and no God or power can overrule them. Every soul is handed their thread and is thus equipped to weave a little patch in the tapestry of life.

Spinning and weaving are sacred activities in many traditions. The Kogi Indians of the Sierra Nevada in Colombia have the most intricate philosophy and express this entire cosmology in terms of the symbolic significance of weaving.

Spinning is a contemplative act. To sit down and twist and roll the fibres into a smooth and even thread involves many thoughts and prayers that become entwined with the resulting thread. When a Kogi sits down to spin a thread he symbolically puts his life in order. In Kogi symbolism the spindle represents a 'lingam-yoni' symbol, the male and female aspects of the universe joined in an act of creation. The wooden shaft is the axis mundi, the world-tree, the symbolic center of the world, while the disk at the top, the whorl, is the world itself. In Kogi mythology the Sun is the cosmic weaver, who weaves the tapestry of life on his cosmic loom, which is defined by the four corner points of the year, the equinoxes and solstices. The sun weaves two pieces of material a year, one for himself and one for his wife, the moon.

In traditional cultures all over the world we find patterns and symbols woven into fabrics and clothes that convey very specific coded messages with regards to the social role of an individual, their tribal relations and perhaps their marital status. In other words the clothes they wear are symbolic representations of their position in their universe.

From these ancient myths and symbols we begin to gain a tiny insight into the significance of fibres, not just as a material resource, but as the stuff that literally weaves the web of life. In sacred cosmology we humans become symbolic co-creators of the universe as we spin the thread with which we weave the fabric of our own and our planet's future.

It is not known when mankind first discovered fibres and developed methods to extract and utilize them, but archaeological evidence suggests that weaving and spinning can be traced back at least 5000 years. The Egyptian mummies were already wrapped in linen sheets and the Neolithic lake dwellers of Switzerland are known to have cultivated flax. In

China, records dating back just as long, bear witness to the use of hemp, another important fibre plant.

From a plant's perspective, fibre is a vital part of its anatomy. It is analogous to our connective tissue, the stuff that gives them strength, support and resilience against wind, wear and tear.

Every plant contains fibre, but many do not have the right properties to make them suitable to be spun into thread. They may be too short or too inflexible, which lets them break easily. Some are just right, but may be difficult to extract. Most plant fibres used for cordage, thread and ropes must be extracted by a process known as 'retting', - which is basically a method of 'rotting' away the non-fibrous parts of the plants until only the fibres remain. The details of the retting process varies depending on each specific fibre plant. It often involves submerging the stalks in water until the softer tissues have rotted away. Once the fibres have been separated out they must be 'combed' and thoroughly dried before they can be further processed and spun into yarn.

Over the last century, since the discovery of oil, artificial fibres have progressively replaced natural fibres. We hardly spare a thought to all these ingenious processes that once upon a time not only kept us warm, but also affirmed our relationship with the Gods and creation. Yet, in recent times the voices of dissent demand a return to natural fibres, since these are biodegradable and thus less harmful to the environment. They also make for healthier clothing, giving the skin a chance to breathe. Fibres are also important as insulation materials for building and construction, helping to create healthier indoor climates (because they can breathe) and to reduce our energy consumption. As oil is beginning to become scarce and people are becoming more aware of the harmful ecological effects of the petrochemical industries, natural fibres are regaining ground and importance, albeit commercially rather than spiritually:

Flax, or linseed is the source plant of linen, and is one of the earliest known fibre plants. It grows best in a mild, somewhat humid climate. In the days of antiquity it was grown as far north as Scotland and as far south as Egypt, where mummies have been found that were been wrapped in linen shrouds thousands of years ago. The fibres are extracted by retting, which is a lengthy process. Then they must be cleaned and brushed before they can be spun. Flax fibres are very long and do not break easily, their resilience in fact increases when they are wet. The quality of flax yarn var-



Flax (Linum usitatissimum)

more easily, which may be why it has fallen out of fashion. However, linen conducts heat better than cotton, making garments feel 'cooler'. Its smooth texture resists dirt.

Flax also provides us with a wonderful, fine quality oil though the variety grown for the highest yield of oil varies from that grown for fibres. Our ancestors used flax oil to fuel their lamps and of course, for cooking. Today it is mostly used to treat wood or may be added to paints to give them a smooth texture and a lustrous finish. Food grade Flax oil is currently being rediscovered for its nutritional benefits. It is the richest vegetable source of omega 3 fatty acids.

A book could be written about the virtues of this invaluable plant that has served humanity for at least 7000 years. Actually, several excellent books have been written about it, but I will limit myself here to its value as a fibre plant. Hemp has the longest, toughest and most resilient fibres of all fibre plants, making it particularly useful for tough ropes and sails that must withstand great pressures, wear and tear. Like Jute or Flax, Hemp is an annual plant. It is not demanding in terms of growing conditions and actually benefits the



Hemp (Cannabis sativa)

ies widely. It can be spun so fine as to create an almost silken texture or, left rough it can be used for canvass and carpet backing. Natural linen is buff-coloured to grey and can be bleached in the sun. It does not take easily to dyes as the fibre is hard and naturally resistant. Bleaching deteriorates its quality, reducing its strength and weight. Linen appears stiffer and harder than cotton and wrinkles

soil. In a previous era, not too long ago, it was widely cultivated throughout Europe, the United States, China and India. However, in recent years it has come under fire because of the psychoactive properties of THC, a plant resin produced by *Cannabis sativa* var. *indica*, a subspecies of hemp, which, however, is never used as a source of fibre, since its fibres are too short. Fibre hemp (*Cannabis sativa*) on the other hand does not pro-

duce any noteworthy amounts of THC. Yet, this confusion is used to rationalize the prohibition of hemp and suppress commercial scale hemp production.

The fibres are derived from the stem, which can reach heights of up to 4m if planted with plenty of space around each plant. When planted close together the individual plants don't grow as high, but the fibre produced is of a finer quality, making it suitable for fine yarns that can be woven into textiles for use as garments. Hemp would make an ideal fibre plant, not just for hard wearing rope or clothes, (the first jeans were made from hemp), but also as a source of fibre pulp for paper (the first dollar notes were printed on hemp paper). It is criminal that forests, including old growth forests, continue to be cut down to produce a 'throw-away' commodity such as paper when there are very viable renewable alternative fibre sources available. The only thing that hinders development on a large scale is legislation, which continues to rule in favour of exploitation instead of sustainable growth.

In recent years some few licenses to produce hemp for fibre and oil have been granted in the US and hemp rope, clothes, paper and food products that utilize the oil pressed from the seeds (no THC, but exceptionally well balanced essential fatty acids and amino acids) have again become available on the market. However, its current impact, compared to its potential, is negligible and most hemp is imported.

The common stinging nettle is another ancient fibre plant, though most people only know it as a weed. Our ancestors not only extracted their long resilient fibres to make cloth and garments, but also used nettles for food and medicine. Nettles as a source of fibre have gone through several cycles of popularity. The last time they were extensively used as a fibre plant was during the WWII in Germany, when cotton grew scarce. Since then interest has dwindled in favour of cheap artificial fibres. However, in recent years they have started to make a come back yet again (weeds don't die) as people are becoming more discerning about chemical treatments of their textiles and are looking for natural fibre alternatives. While the old favourites, hemp and flax produce a tougher, more hardwearing fibre, nettles produce the finest quality yarn of all natural plant fibres. At present Nettles are again being cultivated in Germany, without the use of fertilizers and chemicals to produce a 'natural fibre alternative'. The plants are



Nettles (Urtica dioica)

resistant enough not to need any chemical treatment. In fact, no chemicals at all are used in the processing and the end product is a very soft, silky textile that is immensely resistant to tearing. Nettles thrive on nitrates and can be used to 'clean' over-fertilized land. However, most people, not least of all farmers, consider nettles a bothersome weed and thus far few are willing to grow it. Yet, that might change as farmers may 'cotton on' to the fact that under EU regulations it is the only crop permitted on subsidized 'fallow land'. In an effort to increase yields, a team of Italian, Austrian and German researchers have joined forces to breed new, high yield nettle varieties and to find a solution that would make the process of retting less time consuming and more efficient. Famous Italian fashion houses are ready to launch new lines of fine quality designer nettle knickers and other fashionable clothes - all they are waiting for are sufficient supplies of the raw material.

Sisal is a hard wearing fibre derived from a species of Agave native to Central America and Mexico. Agave sisalana is a sterile hybrid, which points to its long established use as a fibre plant in Central America. The exact origin is not clear, though it derived its name from the port town of Sisal in the Yucatan, from which it was first exported. Today it is grown not only in Mexico, but also in China, Brazil and Africa, with Tanzania being the world's largest producer. Agaves are succulent desert plants with long, fleshy, blue green, sword-like leaves which grow in a rosette formation on a short stumpy stem. The fibres are derived from the fibrous sheath surrounding the inner xylem of the leaves. Sisal is not as resilient as other fibres and can deteriorate quickly during processing. The leaves are harvested by hand and are quickly decorticated, while the leaf pulp is washed away. Sisal is ideally adapted to arid growing condition. Its fibre is used for matting, rope, netting, or in mixtures with wool for carpets etc..



Sisal (Agave sisalana)

Jute and Kenaf, two members of the Hibiscus family, produce a strong, but coarse fibre. Jute is mostly used for sacking and carpet backing. The fibre is not as strong as hemp or flax and is susceptible to rot. It can not be spun into a fine grade yarn and thus does not find use in the textile industry.

Kenaf, a close relative of Jute is mostly used in the manufacture of paper, though in its native Africa it also

supplies fibres for rope and rugs. It is native to hot and humid climates, but is adaptable and will grow as far north as southern Illinois. However, in cooler climates its seeds do not mature. Kenaf is a very viable alternative to Pine for paper production. Considering that each and every American consumes about six 30-year old pines in paper per year and the per-acre yield of Kenaf is 3-5 times higher than that of Pine, Kenaf is the obvious environmentally friendly choice. Kenaf is resistant to most bugs and may be grown organically. It also takes less energy to pulp and does not require chlorine for bleaching. The quality of paper produced from it is very high.



Kenaf (Hibiscus cannabinus)

What about cotton, I can hear you asking, and rightly so. At this point in time, cotton is the most important fibre plant of all. I mention it separately because it is a story of its own. Cotton derives from various species of Gossipium, and belongs to the Malva family. Unlike the other fibre plants discussed above, its fibre does not derive from the stem of the plant, but from the seeds, which grow inside a capsule known as a 'boll'. The seed is surrounded by a soft, fluffy material called 'lint', which consists of fibres that can easily be spun into threads.

Cotton is a tropical crop of enormous commercial importance and was of course instrumental in the ugly business of the slave trade and all the pain and misery that it entailed. Cotton used to be a very labour intensive crop - until the invention of the cotton gin made the separation of the fibre from the seed much

easier, which in turn has made the whole process far more efficient. Today much of cotton processing is done by machines, including the picking. Cotton has become problematic in other ways though. It is highly susceptible to a great variety of bugs, which has made it subject to intense agrochemical treatment. Today it is one of the most heavily sprayed of all crops (8-10 times per season). In



Cotton (Gossipium hirsutum)

fact, 25% of the world's insecticides and more than 10% of the pesticides (including herbicides, insecticides and defoliants.) is sprayed on cotton. At the same time the soil is depleted, calling for vast amounts of fertilizers to compensate.

In the last 5 years disease and bug resistant Gene-manipulated varieties have been created, which are now taking over traditional chemically dependent varieties. In the US, a huge proportion of cotton now derives from GM varieties, which are hailed as environmentally friendly, because they supposedly do not need as much chemical treatment. However, trial plantings of GM cotton in India and Indonesia have failed to prove resistant to insects. Meanwhile consumers are beginning to become aware of these issues and are looking for ecofriendlier alternatives. Organic cotton and fair trade cotton is available, but with the market trend for cheaply produced goods, no matter what the human health or environmental costs may be, they struggle to establish themselves as viable alternatives. Who knows, perhaps nettle will be the eco-fibre of choice for the future.

While this article discusses fibres mostly in terms of textiles, a new and exciting use of natural fibres is emerging, in the automobile industry, of all places. Some of the leading manufacturers of cars are beginning to heed what Ford discovered years ago - natural fibres can make a damn good car. They are not only used for the obvious - upholstery of seats and covers, but also as filling materials and to replace other parts currently made from plastic or glass. A 'bio' plastic is already being produced from Kenaf and Hemp. Natural fibres in such applications have obvious advantages, not just in terms of lower costs, but also in terms of lower environmental impact, since they are generally cheaper to produce and more easily biodegraded once their task has been fulfilled. There are as yet unimagined and exciting possibilities in the world of natural fibres and I for one am certain that they will play a crucial part in readjusting the natural balance for a sustainable future.

RESOURCES

For more on the Kogi Indians read Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff: Land of the Elder Brothers: Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta Colombia,(unfortunately currently unavailable at Amazon) The Sacred Mountain of Colombia's Kogi Indians (Iconography of Religions, Section IX, Vol 2) or see Alan Ereira's documentary, 'From the Heart of the World - The Elder Brothers Warning'

Web page of the Tairona heritage trust has much useful information: <http://www.taironatrust.org/>

For more resources see the Sacred Earth Ethnobotany & ecotravel site at: <http://www.sacredearth.com/ethnobotany/useful/fibres.php>

For questions or comments email: kmorgenstern@sacredearth.com

Disclaimer:

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Kat Morgenstern was born in the western part of Berlin during the days when the wall was still in place, Kat developed an urge to travel and discover the world early on in life.. She travelled across most of central and southern Europe, Morocco, Israel and North America before settling in England for 10 years. She devoted herself to a range of studies (both formally and informally) encompassing a wide variety of interests, from anthropology, comparative religion, mythology and philosophy to Jungian psychology and the healing arts, with a special focus on traditional forms of herbalism. Her varied interests eventually led her to weave the various threads of her knowledge into a unique psychospiritual approach to conservation ethnobotany.



Kat eventually embarked on yet another leg of the 'big journey', this time heading west across the Atlantic, where she spent a further 7 years exploring the Americas. In the US, she first based herself deep in the heart of the American Southwest where she studied and explored the native and hispanic heritage. She also made several field trips south of the border to Central and South America to study the Native and Mestizo cultures of Latin America, their relationships with the environment and the plants within it as well as making contact with various eco-travel companies. In 1996 she set up 'Sacred Earth', a website forum dedicated to ethnobotany and ecotravel, which aims to bring the concepts of conservation ethnobotany to the grassroots level. Sacred Earth offers a huge range of ethnobotany related resources as well as eco-travel opportunities that promote responsible environmental tourism as a form of sustainable development that intends to benefit all, the traveller, the host community and the environment.

Apart from her work with Sacred Earth, Kat also works as a freelance writer and teacher. Her articles have appeared in the Herb Quarterly, France Magazine and Veggie Life as well as several online ezines..

Weaving a Woman's Life

by Paula Chaffee Scardamalia

Weaving touches you, literally touches you every day. Like that advertising slogan, it is “the fabric of your life”. The towels you use to dry yourself after your morning shower are woven. The jeans you slip on in the evening to relax are woven. The sheets you lie down on at night to sleep are, usually, woven. The fabric of your couch, chair seats, drapes, kitchen towels, and rugs are all woven.

And, whether we realize it consciously or unconsciously, weaving and woven fabric not only permeates our lives, it also permeates our language, especially our metaphors. How many times have you used the phrase “woven together”, or “weaves through” to imply an integration of elements? How about that familiar warning – “Oh what a tangled web we weave when first we practice to deceive.” Even the word we use for our internet community, the “Web” refers both to the web of fabric and to the web spun by a spider, an arachnid who, by the way, gets its name from a mythical mortal, Arachne, who dared to challenge the goddess of weaving, Athena, to a contest. She lost, of course, and was turned into a spider for her hubris.

Weaving is one of the oldest crafts, dating back to the Neolithic period, thousands of years before knitting was invented. Weaving was the first way humans found to clothe themselves with something other than skins and furs. Its antiquity is another reason weaving so permeates our lives, our language, and our metaphors. Weaving is primal, basic, calling to us from the beginnings of civilization.

Woven means that there are vertical threads and horizontal threads crossing over and under each other to create the fabric (remember making those loop potholders as a child?). Weaving's structure is basic and symbolic. In that physical act of horizontal over vertical the metaphysical is invoked. Within so many world religions and spiritual traditions, there is the crossing of the horizontal over the vertical – the Christian cross, the Celtic cross, the pagan cross, the Egyp-

tian ankh, the Druidic Tree of Life, Native American traditions' honoring of the four directions, and others – that often represents both the masculine and feminine forces, the material and the spiritual, in relationship to each other.



Author Paula Chaffee Scardamalia at her loom

So woven fabric is a magical cloth consisting of thousands of tiny crosses carrying the numinous energy of both the masculine and feminine, the physical and spiritual in relationship to each other – the primal and divine creative forces.

When I began weaving in the 80's, I did not understand or appreciate what magic this craft held or what it could teach me on a personal and spiritual level, at least not consciously. I must have been pulled, though, to that first weaving class by a distant memory of one of my favorite childhood Disney movies, “The Three Lives of Thomasina”. The movie takes place in early 20th century Wales and has all the makings of a fairytale. One of the central characters is a beautiful, mysterious woman played by Susan Hampshire, who lives in a cottage in the woods. All the local children think this woman is a witch because of the strange, rhythmic sounds coming

from her cottage. When we finally see the inside of the cottage, we find this ethereal blonde, blue-eyed woman sitting at a large floor loom weaving away. The suspicious thumping sound is only the beat of the reed against the cloth.

That image must have brewed in my creative soul for many years, for when the chance came to learn weaving, I took it. Several years later, when woven items accumulated about the house, I began to sell my work, first through the local guild, then at craft shows. More than twenty years later, my studio is filled with yarns, looms, and all the accoutrements that come with having a full-time weaving business. My passion for fiber, texture, color, and design found a home in the loom.

About the same time I was learning to weave and grow a career, I also embarked on a spiritual journey, exploring femi-

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Re-Storying Goddess: Virgin/Maiden, Mother/Creator, Old One/Crone

Statue by Mickie Mueller, photo by Sacred Source
See ad on page 22

by Glenys Livingstone

This is the first of a four part series, which is an edited excerpt from PaGaian Cosmology: Re-inventing Earth-based Goddess Religion. At this point in time the re-storying of Goddess is a complex weaving of the work of many scholars, poets, artists and storytellers. This particular blend as collected over decades has felt like the gathering and piecing together of found shattered fragments of a vessel, until at last I began to sense a Shape. Her Form and Her Shape had not been in any Atlas: it has taken many voyagers, seekers, mapmakers, diggers, stargazers, explorers all willing to go beyond the bounds of the known world ("where there be dragons" as the Old Wisdom says!). The process of re-storying Goddess, as anyone undertakes it for themselves, for and with others, may be like a bird building a nest - a nest in which to Be, and perhaps that may describe what all Her hungry and lost daughters and sons are doing.

Almost every ancient culture's creation myth begins with Her. In the beginning was the Matrix, and the Matrix was all there was. "Before creation a presence existed...(which)... pervaded itself with unending motherhood." This Matrix was not "feminine", in any stereotypical way, which would limit Her to a certain mode of being. She was beyond all pairs of opposites. As the beginning and end of all things, She contained it all - she was yin and yang, right and left, light and dark, linear and cyclic, immanent and transcendent. There was not an either/or. She was not carved up into bits, apportioned a certain fragment of being - She was a totality. She bore within herself all of the polarities. Ancient Mesopotamian texts praise Ishtar of Babylon for her strong, exalted, perfect decrees as Lawgiver, and for her passionate, lifegiving sexuality, all in the one paragraph. As Vajravarahi, Goddess has been known as Mistress of all Knowledge, which in-

cluded her physical being - quite a deal more expansive than more recent academic understandings of "Master of Arts".

One of Ishtar's titles has been translated as "Great Whore", but this falls far short of the original understanding. As Merlin Stone has pointed out, the use of words like "prostitute" or "harlot" or "whore" as a translation for "qadishtu" negates the sanctity of this priestly role and reveals an ethnocentric subjectivity on the part of the writer. The patriarchal bias in the minds of the writers disabled their comprehension of a holy woman who was sexual. The use of the word "Whore" to label One who embodied the Mystery of the Universe, has enabled patriarchal religions to denigrate the Female Metaphor - sometimes out of ignorance, sometimes with conscious intent.

As Isis of Egypt, Great Goddess was Mother of the Universe. This did not mean that there was a Father of whom she was partner, as most human minds of our time assume. This title meant that she was the One from whom all becoming arose. It

meant that she was the Creator. In our

times many rush to affirm the now-known male role in reproduction; however, there has never been the same affirmation in the West, of the female role in reproduction when the God has been Creator. To comprehend Mother as Creator does not need to negate the integrity of the male, it simply re-instates the integrity of the female and her Creative capacity. As Mut of Egypt, She possibly preceded Isis: Her title meaning "Mother". The title held within it the complete cycle that supported life - virgin, mother and crone - beginning, fullness, and ending ... the original Trinity. Mother was not a mere passive vessel, nor was she limited to the birthing and feeding aspects that later cultures allowed her; Mother was an wholistic title incorporating the beginning and the end. Long before Jesus was said to have



described himself as the "Alpha and the Omega", Goddess as Mother was comprehended in this complete form.

As Inanna of Sumeria, She was "primary one" for three thousand five hundred years. Her story of descent and return, death and resurrection, is the oldest story humans have of this heroic journey, and it influences the later stories of redeemer/wisdom figures such as Persephone, Orpheus, and Jesus.

In Greece, perhaps as early as the Paleolithic era, the Divine Female was known as Nyx, Black Mother Night, "the primordial foundation of all manifested forms", who laid the Egg of creation. She was the full Emptiness, the empty Fullness. Aristophanes later sang of Her, "Black-winged Night ... laid a wind-born egg, and as the seasons rolled, Forth sprang Love, the longed-for, shining with wings of gold." Her Darkness was understood as "a depth of love", not a source of evil as later humans named Her.

As Aphrodite, She was said to be older than time. Aphrodite as humans once knew Her, was no mere sex goddess; She was once a Virgin-Mother-Crone trinity, and indistinguishable from the Fates and more powerful. Aphrodite was "multivalent", had many names: characteristic of most Goddesses because the religion was oral and Poetic, and the stories of the diverse manifestations of the Ultimate Principle linked and embellished upon as humans told them and travelled. Aphrodite was associated with the sea as birth-place. The Love that She embodied was a Love deep down in things; it could be expressed as an "allurement" intrinsic to the nature of the Universe. The Orphics sang of Her:

*For all things are from You
Who unites the cosmos.
You will the three-fold fates
You bring forth all things
Whatever is in the heavens
And in the much fruitful earth
And in the deep sea.*

She represented a fundamental cosmic dynamic. Western science speaks of a primal dynamism of attraction in the universe, using the word "gravity" to point to it, but it remains fundamentally mysterious. And what difference Hymns of this kind to the Psalms, which have been understood to praise the Divine.

As Tara, She was known from India to Ireland. In Tantric Buddhism She is understood to be at once transcendent and immanent, at the centre of the cycle of birth and death, pressing "toward consciousness and knowledge, transformation and illumination."

As Prajnaparamita in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, She is transcendent Wisdom and recognized as " 'Mother of all the Buddhas': Buddha activity arises out of, is born from

Wisdom." Her space is not a passive place, it is fertile and vibrant.

As Kali Ma, in the Hindu tradition, She is addressed as Supreme and Primordial ... the Beginning of all, Creatrix, Protectress and Destructress." The mystic Ramakrishna of the 19th century, was overwhelmed by passion to realize Her. When She did reveal Herself to him, he experienced "a limitless, infinite shining ocean of consciousness or spirit" - he was "panting for breath".

As Demeter of Greece, She is Mother of the grain, which was understood to hold the Awesomeness of Being and celebrated in the Eleusinian Mysteries. The 'Vision into the Abyss of the Seed', was a vision of the Vulva - the Mother of all Life. Demeter is always in relationship with Her Daughter-Self Persephone: as Mother She gives the sheaf of wheat to the Daughter, passing on the Knowledge, representing the continuity, the unbroken thread of life. Mother Goddess and Daughter reveal the Mystery of the seed in the fruit, the fruit in the seed, the eternal Creativity. Persephone, like Demeter - the Grain, "becomes the Goddess of the three worlds: the earth, the underworld, and the heavens." They and their initiates are eternal.

In the Christian tradition, Mary of Nazareth came to embody Goddess: mythologically and in the hearts and minds of the people regardless of ambivalent official Church postures. Mary became known as Moon Goddess, Star of the Sea, Our Lady and many other titles that recall more ancient Goddess roots. Mary has been the one to whom the people turned, certain of Her Love and mercy.

To the Sumerians the Divine was Queen Nana, to the Romans "Anna Perenna". She is Al-Uzza of Mecca, Artemis of Ephesus, Anatis of Egypt, Eurynome of Africa, Coatlique of the Aztecs. She has been known in innumerable ways and by innumerable names as humans tried to express their perception of the Great Mystery. She has been present throughout the millennia in the myths, rituals, religions and poetry of humanity. She has been loved and revered.

Even before She appeared in human form, stones, trees, pools, fruits and animals were identified with Her or parts of Her. Poppies and pomegranates and other such many-seeded flora identified Her fertility and abundance. Earth was understood as Her belly or womb, providing places of refuge. Primal peoples everywhere at some time understood Earth Herself as Divine One - Mother. The pre-Celtic indigenous Europeans named Her - the Land - as Lady Sovereignty. In Greece She was known as Gaia.

Central to understanding Her - as Metaphor and Mother - is understanding the sacredness of vessels... as representations of Her: these "made possible the long term storage of oils and grains; the transforming of raw food into cooked; ... also sometimes used to store the bones and ashes of the dead." Vessels were felt as extensions of the female body that shaped life, carried the unborn, and provided nourishment. The making and decorating of pottery in many cultures

was among the primordial functions of woman. The chalice was the holy Cup, felt as Her power to give life. Riane Eisler in *The Chalice and the Blade*, compares the chalice's power to give life with that of the blade, which is the power to take life, and develops how this was borne out culturally. In Christianity, woman was denied the right to handle the vessel as chalice - a ritual metaphor for the huge transition that had taken place in human understanding; as if the female body no longer belonged to the female.

Water was a central Goddess abode, as it nourished and transformed, and also contained. She was identified with the water birds and ducks: She was the life giving force, nurturing the world with moisture. Rain was divine food - the very milk of Her breasts. Our ancestors frequently featured breasts set in rain torrents on the jars that they made.

The tree as container and shelter, and also sometimes bearer of nourishment was a central vegetative presence of Goddess. The figuring of a fruit tree in a negative context in later religious stories of humanity was not an arbitrary matter - it was understood by the people of that time to represent Her. The story was clearly a political statement.

Some animals were identified as particularly potent with Her; the deer with its fast growing antlers speaking of Her regenerative power, the toad with its pubic shape, the bull with its crescent shaped horns, the butterfly that emerged from its dark transformative space, the bear that so powerfully protected the young, the pig with its fast growing body and soft fats. Animals with which women have been "insulted" - cow, duck, hen - are animals once sacred to the Female. The snake with its shedding skin and intimacy with Earth has been especially significant representing immortality, vitality, power and wisdom: a Mother-power that the later patriarchs rejected. In Christian art, Mary is often depicted standing on the snake crushing it.

As the humans developed symbols, one of the earliest representations of Goddess was the downward pointing triangle, the pubic triangle: a recognition of the Source of life, the Gateway. Sometimes Goddess was depicted displaying her breasts, belly, genitalia, or entire naked body as a form of divine epiphany. Today, Western science stories that the Universe constantly rushes away from its birthplace, still expanding: the Gateway still pours Itself forth. All of manifestation is divine epiphany: She has been renewed empirically. We live in a YoniVerse.

Central to the understanding of Great Goddess is the recurrent cycle of birth and death, the immortal process of creation and destruction: seen clearly in the moon, with its waxing, fullness and waning, which also corresponds to the body cycle of menstruation. This constant flux of things is manifest everywhere, in the seasons, in breathing, in eating: this is Her nature. Anthropomorphized, this cycle often became known as Virgin, Mother, and Crone. In Her most ancient and powerful depictions, Great Goddess embodies all three: representing the Cycle of Creativity and cannot be separated. One phase cannot "be" on its own, and so Goddess

of old was known ... a union of three qualities, complete and whole, yet ever in flux and dynamic. This triune nature later appropriated by the patriarchal God, in both the East and West, had no such relationship to the cycle of Life.

Ultimately the Female Metaphor, Goddess, is about the celebration of Life, its eruption, its flux, its sustenance, with all that life demands and gives. She is an affirmation of the power symbolized by the chalice, the power to give life: initiate it, sustain it, pour it out. This is the power to Be, that all beings must have; not the power to Rule, that only a few might take. The popular Jungian understanding of the "Feminine" is not sufficient to contain Her, shuffled off as She usually is to a portion of reality: these qualities are only part of Her. She is not manifesting "masculinity" when she hunts for food, and neither is the human female when she operates analytically or assertively. As Virgin, Mother and Crone, Goddess is eagle, bear, lioness, snake, as well as deer, gentle breeze, flower, rabbit.

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Glenys Livingstone Ph.D. (Social Ecology) has been culturally and academically involved in the resurgence of Goddess imagery for the sacred for over three decades. She is the author of PAGA-

IAN COSMOLOGY: RE-INVENTING EARTH-BASED GODDESS RELIGION. *She lives in Australia, the land of her birth. She completed post-grad theological studies in Berkeley California in 1982. She is a celebrant of the seasonal rituals according to her place on the planet. Her website is <http://pagaian.org>, where her book is live.*

Continued from page 17

nist theology, Wicca, Native American spiritual traditions (I am a small part Cherokee on my mother's side), Hinduism, Buddhism, meditation, and yoga. I kept looking for "the Teacher," while hearing over and over in my mind, "When the student is ready the teacher will appear."

Often, what is not explained when someone makes that statement is that the teacher doesn't necessarily come in the form of a guru or wise sage. Often the teacher is a relationship with someone – a boss, a partner, a child, a friend, or even a pet. Equally often the teacher is a practice – the doing of something with commitment, consistency, focus, and endurance. In my case, weaving has been one of my primary spiritual teachers – it just took me a while to realize it.

My other realization was that weaving is not something separate from all the other things I do as wife, mother, author, creativity coach, and dream worker. For years, I kept asking myself, "Is this what I am supposed to do? Or am I supposed to be a writer, or a teacher or, or, or..." Gradually, I understood that weaving is part of it all, and that it is all part of weaving; that, in fact, weaving gave me insights into all those areas and vice versa. It was, excuse the expression, all interwoven!

While I may still be traveling the path to wisdom and enlightenment after all these years, at least now I know I merely have to follow the threads of a craft that stretches forward and backward in time, that joins the material with the spiritual, and I will be well on my way.

So, for you, I hope that you may find the person or practice that will guide you on your spiritual path. And with each throw of the shuttle and each beat of the reed, may the fabric of your life grow more beautiful and strong.

About the Author:

Paula Chaffee Scardamalia is a book and creativity coach, a speaker, and the award-winning author of "Weaving a Woman's Life: Spiritual Lessons from the Loom", inspired by her successful career as a nationally recognized professional weaver and designer. Using dreams, tarot, and rituals, she coaches women and leads group and individual retreats. Her weekly ezine, Divine Muse-ings, helps writers and other creatives stay connected to the Muse and lead an inspired, gutsy and productive creative life. You can sign up at for her newsletter or order her book at www.diviningthemuse.com.

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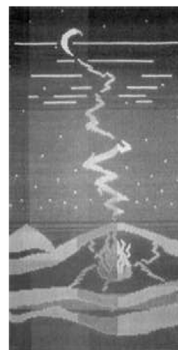
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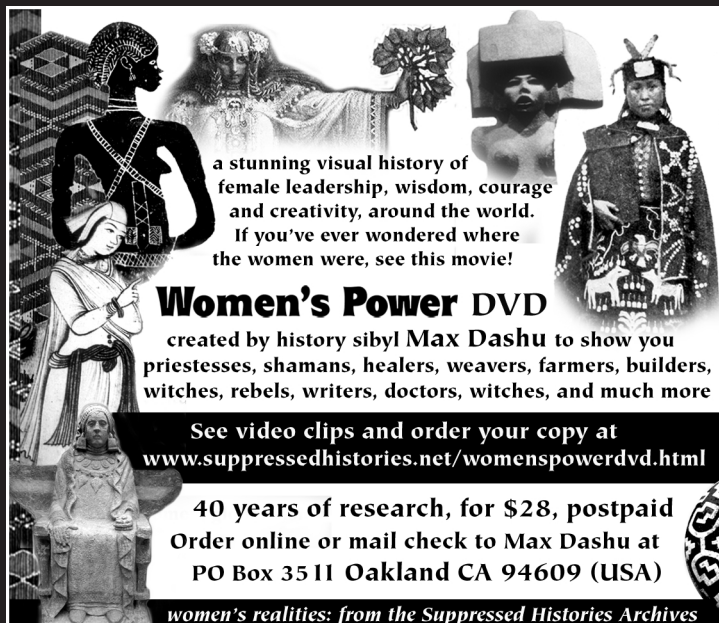


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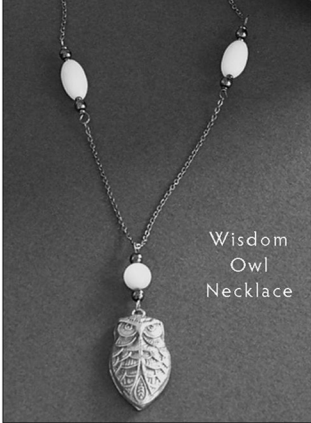
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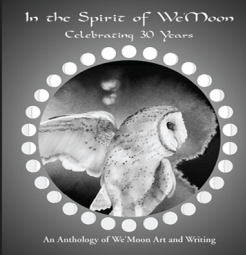
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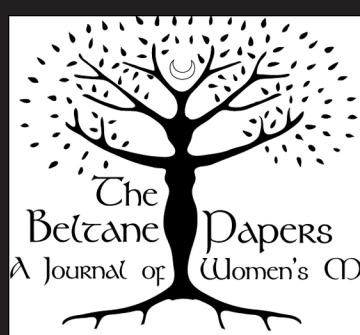
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