

Section 1 – The Foragers

The First Goddess: The Sea

To the people wandering along the shore, the sea must have seemed to be the source of life itself. Everywhere they looked, in the rock pools, in the mud, in the shallows, in the inter-tidal zone, the waters teemed with living things. They had simply to gather up the food that nature provided for them. There would have been driftwood to build fires and shelters, and from the land near the coast they would have gleaned vegetables and other useful things, like grass to weave into baskets. The food supply would have been adequate and as they depleted each local resource, the group moved on.

When fresh water is scarce, one is certain to find it where rivers enter the sea, and many littoral plants, for example, coconuts, are a source of potable liquids. Palms and other shoreline plants would have provided shade and shelter. Our ancient foremothers wandered, moving along the shore from river mouth to river mouth.

The people who came across the Red Sea were modern, thinking, articulate humans like us. They would have tried to understand who they were and where they came from, just as we do.

Humans seek design and agency in everything.¹ When we see random patterns, we interpret them in anthropomorphic terms. We see faces in rock formations, in the branches of trees and in clouds. Whenever we encounter something we do not understand our first reaction is to personalise it, to make it like us so that we can conceptualise it. We see causality in random events and constantly ascribe a sense of agency to the world around us. This is the root of the earliest belief system we know of, animism, which holds that everything – and depending on the culture this may include completely inanimate objects like rocks and mountains – contains a spirit force that is a form of will that can be helpful or malign, benevolent or dangerous, depending on how we behave towards it. Animism remains an important world faith even today.

Women living by the sea would have noticed that their menstruation coincided with the same phase of the moon and pattern of tides. They knew that when they gave birth, first came their waters, and it was within these that their babies had grown. Everywhere they looked, the sea's water teemed with living things. What created this life? Having experienced the pain, delirium

¹ Shermer, Michael. *Patternicity: Finding Meaningful Patterns in Meaningless Noise*. Scientific American. Nov. 2008. (<http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/patternicity-finding-meaningful-patterns/>) retrieved 25/5/2015

and delight of bringing forth life themselves, women must have wondered at the sea, always at the moment of parturition, constantly creating life on an immeasurable scale.

The natural reaction of a human mother pondering the mysteries of life beside the mighty ocean would be to conceptualise it as a living being, but on a scale so great as to be beyond comprehension. She would create, in her mind, a being with attributes like hers, yet multiplied immeasurably in power. This being would be the animating force that guided the mighty ocean and controlled not only its destructive force but also its power of creation. The woman would create a deity: a Great Mother.

At that moment, the Goddess opened her eyes and smiled on the children who so fondly invented her. She answered their deep psychological need to know about themselves, and to find a reason for their lives: the Goddess-Sea provided for the people and in return, the people praised the sea, came to worship her as their mother. They found spiritual purpose in devotion to her.

The Sea features in the original creation myth in many ancient cultures. We shall look in detail at the Sumerian mythology, the earliest for which we have a written record, because it directly informs so many other, later cultures. Here, the first Goddess was Nammu, the Eternal Sea, who created, alone, the Earth and the Sky in her womb. This element in the creation-myth of a people who lived so far inland may be a lingering folk-memory of a time when their ancestors lived by and from the sea, which was their first mother, their protector, their Goddess.

Life was probably good for the people wandering naked along the shore. A tropical littoral forest is a paradise, a genuine nature's larder. One can pick the food from the trees or scoop it from the rivers or the shoreline, and this largesse is available all year round. During the day, women would gather fuel and forage for food and prepare it, and as the sun set the people would group around the fire to eat and talk. This is how we are, we humans: at the end of the day of toil we come together to cook our food, eat and chat, and tell stories. So there would have been story-tellers. Sitting in the dancing firelight in the balmy tropical evening, for night falls early there, people would tell stories to amuse and teach each other. Those who clustered together in the evening were less likely to become prey, get lost or have an accident in the dark, so entertaining the group, making it stay together, would have had an evolutionary benefit. Storytelling, the basis of all art, became innate to humans.

The stories they told were handed down from generation to generation. But there are many nights and much need of stories, so new ones would have been invented all the time. These may have told of the old days, perhaps recalling a dim memory of life in the interior of the great continent. Perhaps the ancestors themselves were remembered in tales that grew in the retelling,

until their strength or wisdom or beauty was more than merely human; that is a tradition that has carried forward to this day. Some tales might have explained distant features that they could see, such as mountains and forests, and strange beings that might live there. They might explain the animals that they hunted, or that hunted them. And what of the sea itself? Did it extend only as far as the eye could see and then come to an end, or did it go on forever? Sometimes, the stories would have been funny. There would have been jokes and laughter. Sometimes the stories were sad and told of lost loves or the parting of the ways. Often they taught lessons or provided warnings, and served to teach the young or to establish the moral rules for the group.

This telling of stories was the beginning of the oral tradition, the origin of myth, and germs of these myths were retained and handed down for hundreds of generations. Humans then were just like humans now and story-telling is an ancient craft indeed.

In this society the women and children formed the hub around which the group of male hunters orbited. Women, sharing the power of creation with the Sea Goddess, appeared to be part of her. Their bodies cycled with the moon and the tides. And they were able to bring forth life and sustain it by the magical power to make milk until the child was old enough to eat solid food.