

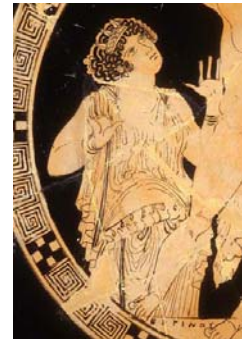
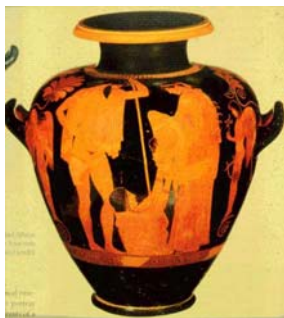
DAUGHTER'S OF GAIA: HOW WOMEN ARE CHANGING THE PSYCHE OF THE PLANET ONE TREE AT A TIME

by

Kathryn Smith-Hanssen, Ph.D.

∞

For the ancient Greeks, *Ge* or *Gaia* embodied the soul spark, the manifest energy, in the creation of all life. She was the primal goddess of the Earth, imagined as one of the *protogenoi*, those who came before. For the Greeks, she was the first; primeval; inseparable from the Earth; mother of all. In Latin, her name was translated as *terra*. According to Hesiod's *Theogony*,¹



Ge or *Gaia* was born out of Chaos along with *Tartaros* (the personification of the dark, sunless region beneath the earth) and *Eros*. Hesiod said that it was *Eros* that brought about the union of the original Father and Mother: *Ouranos* (Sky) and *Gaia* (Earth). Other versions have her bearing *Ouranos*, *Ourea* (the Mountains), and *Pontus* (the Sea) as well as mortals, parthenogenically, without a mate.²

In addition to the mythology of *Gaia*, this article includes the assumption that there is a “psyche” of the planet or “world soul.” For Plato, the World Soul was “*a priori*, that which comes before all else; a metaphysical principle of relatedness in which the order, beauty, and goodness of the cosmos were rooted. The imagination of a “world soul” weaves itself throughout Western thought and depth psychology from Plato to the Stoics, Jewish and Christian mystics,

Renaissance	...Therefore, we may consequently state that:	philosophers,
German and English	this world is indeed a living being endowed with	Romantics of the
19 th century,	a soul and intelligence ... a single visible living	American
Transcendentalists	entity containing all other living entities, which	such as Emerson
and Thoreau,	by their nature are all related.	Phenomenologists
	-Plato ¹	

such as Van den Berg, Merleau-Ponty, and Bachelard, poets such as Yeats, Rilke, and Wallace Stevens.³ In referring to the world soul as, “that particular soul spark, that seminal image, which offers itself through each thing in its visible form,”⁴ James Hillman, someone who has

written eloquently on this concept as it applies to the field of depth psychology, says that *anima mundi* is: “The animated possibilities presented by each event as it is, its sensuous presentation as a face bespeaking its interior image—in short, its availability to imagination, its presence as a psychic reality.”⁵

But, even before the mythology of *Gaia* or the concept of *anima mundi* found a hold in the Western imagination, the idea of a world soul has infused the psyche of indigenous groups or animist people worldwide in an unbroken continuum. It is manifest in the concept of Great Spirit, which is both personal *and* immanent in the material world. Great Spirit, which goes by many names around the world, fills all things of the world with life, and in each thing *anima mundi* is manifest. C.G. Jung writes, “The primitive psyche appears as the source of life, the prime mover, a ghostlike presence which has objective reality....it is something objective, self-subsistent, and living its own life.”⁶ But, it doesn’t take Plato or depth psychology to substantiate what we experience ourselves...to let us know the world is, indeed, ensouled. We know *anima mundi*...it is within us, and around us. It is present in every sunrise, every sunset.

After centuries of overt suppression in the mainstream of Western scientific thought, the ancient belief in an ensouled cosmos was resurrected in a radical theory of creation and evolution developed by James Lovelock and Lynn Margolis in the 1970’s that was given the name “Gaia Hypothesis.” Originally contracted to determine if there was life on Mars, Lovelock’s research led him to refocus on Earth’s atmosphere, where he concluded that life on our planet must be the result of an energy that despite the *disequilibrium* of nature acts to produce enough of a homeostasis to sustain life. This groundbreaking theory scientifically reimagined the idea of the earth as a single, interconnected organism.⁷ Lovelock named this energy *Gaia* because he rightly felt that this energy was a primal force that helped to create and sustain life on Earth, as well as help the natural world evolve and create a *new* homeostasis. Lovelock and Margulis’ work is controversial, but it continues to endure as a profound reimagining of the deep interconnectedness and ecology of nature within Western thought.



The 1970s also bore witness to a struggle for social and political equity that rebirthed the feminist movement; a renewed identification with a female, divine creator; and, a deep revisioning of women’s place in the natural world called “eco-feminism.” Simply put, eco-

feminists argue that a relationship exists between the oppression of women and the degradation



of nature and vice versa. In India, one of the main spokespersons for this movement is Vandana Shiva, who has written extensively on the subject as it applies to poor, rural women in India. One of her themes has been to explore how society values its natural resources according to how they are “productive.” She cites a forest which is valued if it is cut down and replanted with a commercially saleable,

monoculture species in contrast to a diverse, multistoried forest that provides a multitude of services and benefits to local communities.

In depth psychology, we might talk about this difference in approach as a kind of monotheism versus polytheism. It is a conflict between the state-run forest management system and commercial interests (a kind of monotheism of centralized power) that values the earth only for its commercial benefit versus a more diverse and inclusive decision-making paradigm made up of forest-dependent inhabitants, non-government representatives, environmental-green groups, local communities and government (a pluralistic, polytheistic model) who value the forest for its multiple benefits including its sacred, spiritual function. Worldwide, this dominant, centralized approach valuing commercialism of the natural world has led to an increased degradation of the land and marginalization of the rural people who live there, especially women.⁸

Indigenous people worldwide repeatedly state, “If we lose our land or our forests, we die.” Now, it may not be the case that they will literally die. They may move on to another piece of land or become urban migrants. Metaphorically, it is a statement of psychic reality, of soul truth; an image for their existence, their identity with the earth: “as the soul of the forest ceases to exist, the soul of our people similarly ceases to exist; what is reflected in the world soul, is reflected in my soul. Its pathology is my pathology and, as a group, our pathology.” It is an expression of the collective grief and loss of the world soul. Their connection to place is, as Hillman would suggest, a “psychic reality” and as Jung might have imagined it, a statement affirming the “source of life.” Like *Gaia*, they cannot separate themselves from the earth.

It is a reality that those of us in the West are only beginning to become conscious of as the looming catastrophe of global warming and climate change, increased deforestation, and

pollution of our oceans and fresh water sources is quickly becoming a part of our daily vocabulary and nightly news. For Hillman, this environmental destruction and pathology of the world soul has become a call to reawaken our “heart response” – “For where there is pathology there is psyche, and where psyche, eros.”⁹ I would also suggest that it is a call to reimagine the mythology of *Gaia*...to reinfuse her myths of identification with the Earth; imagine and initiate new paradigms, creation myths, and ways of existing; and, move towards a new homeostasis that requires an immediate evolution of consciousness. For the macrocosm, these ideas are national and global; for the microcosm, we turn to small, grassroots groups like the Gond women, a small tribal group in central India.

There are 68 million tribal people in India, about 8% of the total population, and 20% of the world’s indigenous population of approximately 340 million. In India, tribals are not a part of the outdated Hindu caste system and, although it was ruled illegal at Independence, they still suffer social and economic discrimination. Although some of the first peoples of the continent, over the past 2,000 years they have been increasingly marginalized by waves of invaders and migrants to the remaining forest areas and remote, upper watersheds. Today, the “forest belt” that runs east-west across central India is generally synonymous with the “tribal belt.”

The Gond of Andhra Pradesh, central India, are predominantly animist, regarding all natural life as sacred and full of spirit energy. Most of their deities are associated with animals and from the Hindu religion they have integrated *Hannuman*, the Monkey God, and *Naga*, the Snake God of the underworld. Forests have always been sacred, with rituals of protection and appeasement often held under certain spirit trees. Traditionally, these groups have survived by hunting, gathering, and farming in the forest. But, due to increased commercialization, spread of agriculture, and illegal logging, the forests have become badly degraded pushing them deeper into poverty.



In 2000, with the assistance of international development organizations, payments for community and environmental improvement projects went for the first time *directly* into the hands of rural women. Previously, development projects only funded outside contractors, private companies, or paid the villagers for daily work. This resulted in either few cash benefits

to the locals or one's that ended with the termination of the project. At that time, the literacy rate among tribals was only 15% compared to a national average of 61%. But, with some basic training and education, some of them learning to write their name for the first time, these illiterate tribal women formed self-help groups that are helping to lead an environmental and economic revolution among the rural poor.

From the initial seed money provided by the new projects, these women's self-help groups or *auwhal* (mother's groups) have now leveraged thousands of dollars in re-investment monies. Women are paying themselves a salary for the work they perform as well as paying the men in their villages, including their husbands, sons, and fathers. In addition, they are beginning to have enough money to reinvest in their communities for a multitude of projects and avoid the usurious practices of the local "moneylenders" who kept them in a never-ending cycle of debt. Some of their projects are tree nurseries, building check dams to prevent erosion, digging wells, thinning forests for saleable tree poles, and planting new trees.



As they work, save, reinvest, and leverage increasingly larger bank loans, they are also able to improve the quality of their communities by building better houses, schools and health clinics, paying for teachers and mobile health workers, purchasing fuel-efficient stoves and water



purifiers, and sending their older children to a residential school for tribals. In addition, they are able to buy equipment that can increase their economic benefit such as tractors, oil presses, and motorcycles they can rent out to other villagers. Larger projects are planting *Pongomia* orchards to produce bio-fuel, building roads, starting a soyabean collective, and increasing the production of *Lak* or varnish. Each of these ventures is generating thousands of dollars profit for these women's groups per year.

The economic and social revolution of these women's groups is evolving from individual village groups, to collective networks, and to larger federations made up of hundreds of groups. These larger federations have meetings twice a month, inviting representatives from government agencies and banks to discuss ways to generate even more income. In 2004, just in Andhra

Pradesh, 500,000 women's self-help groups with over 5 million women leveraged over \$238 million. And, in the last 25 years, with the advent of more equitable government policies, tribals now legally control over 50 million acres or 27% of India's total forest land. Of course, with renewed prosperity, comes envy and conflict. In some cases, women have been raped, beaten, or died as they fight to reimagine their role in managing their own resources.

The Gond women say, "When we got knowledge, we got courage." Against all odds, they are succeeding. In discussing the relationship between indigenous societies and gender, Rosemary Ruether writes in *Gaia and God*, "The key issue of female power and prestige seems to be the extent of women's control of their *own products* as a female group."¹⁰ For the Gond, their experience supports the claim of the eco-feminists that empowering women in rural society in turn re-energizes the sustainability of nature.

In their capacity to mobilize themselves collectively and overcome the challenges of their limited experience, education, gender, and marginal place in Indian society, these women embody the best of *Gaia*. They are determined to fight for the survival of their communities and environment because of a strong identification with their land and forests, they are fiercely protective of their children and the betterment of their future, and they have transformed the norm in their communities to become women of power, self-sufficiency, and means. Gond women are re-creating the future destiny of their communities and environment, evolving to maintain a new homeostasis...one that is autonomous and strong.

They also remind us that the dominant Western myth of expulsion from the garden is not everyone's myth. The Gond believe they are still *in* the garden. Their "myth" is that those on the outside are trying to get back in...steal their fruit, cut down their forest, and sell their land to the highest bidder. By recognizing their right to tend their garden, we will ensure the sustainability of the natural environment in rural India after the government poverty reduction schemes and international development projects have long gone. Gond women know the wisdom of *Gaia*: without caring for the Earth, we have nothing. In caring for the Earth, we have everything.



This women's movement is not just limited to India. Women all over Asia, Latin America, and Africa are struggling against huge odds to re-assume their ancient and traditional roles as caretakers and stewards of the land. It is a testament to this global movement that in

2004, the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to Wangari Maathai, an environmental activist from Kenya. Increasingly concerned about the environmental degradation of the land, her solution was simple: encourage women to plant trees. The idea proved a huge success and today there are 600 community-based networks who have planted more than 30 million trees in Kenya alone.¹¹ Women worldwide, these daughters of Gaia, continue to be empowered through their deep relationship in caring for the earth and the earth, in turn, regreening itself. ∞



© 2007 Kathryn Smith-Hanssen

Notes

¹ Hesiod was a Greek poet of the 8th century BCE. His epic poems include *Works and Days* and the *Theogony*. He or members of his school also wrote the *Shield of Heracles* and the *Catalogue of Women*. The *Theogony* discusses the creation of the universe and was written as an account of the origin and descent of the gods.

² See *Who's Who Classical Mythology* by Michael Grant and John Hazel. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) and the *Meridian Handbook of Classical Mythology* by Edward Tripp. (New York: New American Library, 1974).

³ But in addition to the cosmological dimension, the idea of the World Soul suggests an "epistemology of sameness" in which we are able to know the universe only because we are an embodiment of living nature itself. In this sense, the harmony of the World Soul points toward an inclusive worldview in which aesthetics, ecology, ethics, mathematics, economics, science, art, and epistemology are not separate, but inherently related areas."³ See James Hillman, *The Thought of the Heart and the Soul of the World*. (Woodstock, CT), 1995, pp. 127-28.

⁴ IBID, p. 101.

⁵ IBID, p. 101.

⁶ CW8, PAR. 665

⁷ James Lovelock and Dr. Lynn Margulis came to the Gaia hypothesis gradually. Lovelock was first approached in the 60's by NASA to help discover if there was life on Mars. After devising a strategy to test the atmospheric gases, he determined that the atmosphere of Mars was in a stable state of chemical equilibrium and was lifeless. Applying the same strategy to the Earth's atmosphere, he concluded that the Earth was in a state of extreme disequilibrium and, yet, was capable of supporting life. He reasoned that there must be some other force that acted upon the Earth to produce the homeostasis of the Earth's biosphere. In his acceptance speech for the Liberty Medal Ceremony in 1994 awarded to Vaclav Havel, the former President of Czechoslovakia and then the Czech Republic until 2003, Havel's acceptance speech was entitled "Post Modernism: The Search for Universal Laws." In this speech, he described post-modernism as "...a mixing and blending of cultures, and plurality of parallelism of the intellectual and spiritual worlds...a symbol of that state is a Bedouin mounted on a camel and clad in traditional robes under which he is wearing jeans, with a transistor radio in his hands and an ad for Coca-Cola on the camel's back."⁷

⁸ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ecofeminism>

⁹ Hillman, p. 126.

¹⁰ In Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994) pg. 161. Ruether is professor of theology at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary in Evanston, IL. She is the author of many books including *Women-Church*, *Woman/New Earth*, and co-editor of *Women and Religion in America*.

¹¹ See the website www.greenbeltmovement.org.