

Section 4 – Sacred Marriage

Hierogamy: The Great Rite

In the Great Rite, a female shaman played the role of the Goddess, to whom she was closely bound through prayer, meditation and other ritual practices, such as the use of alcohol and narcotics. The bond was profound, for in her travels into the spirit- realm, the shaman literally became the Goddess; she was the embodiment of this mighty power, the source of all Creation and of time itself.

A partner was chosen from amongst the young men. Likely, as was continued in later versions, the choice was a matter of profound spirituality that required the satisfaction of many rules. Auguries would have been cast, meditations practised and arcane lore known only to women discussed in the search for the right partner. It is likely that the shaman was surrounded and assisted by the other women in making the choice, since similar phenomena are seen in later, similar cultures. It is possible that the boy had to be a virgin; we see an inversion of this in later cultures where the bride must be untouched and this is by no means the only such inversion we will discover.

Once selected, the boy would have been lionised. He had been identified as the Goddess' consort, and thus was a central figure in the culture. His semen was required to fertilise the Goddess, in the form of her earthly avatar, and so assure the continuation of time. This would have been a great honour for him and for his family. He would have been anointed with oils and unguents and dressed in ceremonial robes, while his family would have been rewarded with blessings and favours.

The shaman, and later the High Priestesses who inherited this role, would also have prepared herself as she did for a journey into the spirit world. She would ingest drugs, chant or dance. She would be perfumed and adorned with her jewellery and her hair coiffed. Her face and eyes would be made up, making her features the more striking.

It is possible that hierogamy was the portal into the life of a shaman amongst the sisterhood of women. In other words; perhaps conceiving new life was an original 'rite of passage' through which a girl not only became a woman, but also part of a powerful caste of female shamans.

On the other hand, the shaman might have been an older, more experienced woman, perhaps even the 'first amongst equals', the matriarch herself.¹

Resplendent in her beauty, wearing the ornate finery placed upon her by her sisters, already in an altered state of consciousness as a result of the preliminary rites, the shaman would appear before the tribe. She was the Goddess now, the power of Creation personified, and the focus was her womb and her vagina. Likely her breasts were bare – we know that in later Goddess cultures this was commonplace and a sign of power – and indeed, she may have been naked or nearly so, apart from her adornments.

She would proceed to a prepared bed and there wait while her consort was brought to her. He too would also have been made-up, oiled and prepared. Possibly, through the use of herbs and drugs or by other means, he was already erect; later images depict the Goddess' consort with a naked, erect penis.

While the other women chanted and in the dancing light of fires, the young man approached the bed where the shaman lay. This was a highly sexualised and charged environment, full of music and drums and perfumed smoke. The atmosphere would have been as conducive to a successful sexual union as possible. Both parties knew what to do and had most likely been rigorously coached in how to perform, since it was essential that the ritual should be enacted properly for its power to have effect.²

Then, before the gathered people and while ritual verses were chanted, the shaman and her consort would come together in sexual union. This moment, at which the phallus and womb come together, had huge cultural significance – and would have for millennia.³

The Great Rite was not just spiritual but shamanistic in nature. The act was highly ritualised. The chanting of poems and words, the carrying out of specific acts, including bathing and changing clothes, the couple lying together in specific ways, and the presence of not only an audience but assistants to the principal couple, all carry the hallmarks of shamanistic rite. Since the imperative was that the shaman should conceive and this ritual was so important, the couple would have remained together until the woman's menstruation stopped and she knew that she was with child.

¹ The later literature provides evidence for both models, as will be discussed.

² In these societies sex, while often surrounded by cultural rules and rituals, was and remains a very open part of everyday life. People, uncorrupted by the bizarre and arbitrary rules surrounding sex that are only a part of later cultural baggage, do not feel the need to hide sexuality or sexual behaviour. Sex was not an exclusively private act; within homes with more than one generation and many children living in communal, large rooms, it was rather a shared expression of love.

³ The Egyptian ankh, for example, depicts the moment at which the phallus and womb come together, thus symbolising creation and life.

Sex releases into the blood natural stimulants that not only heighten our pleasure, but also cause us to step outside our everyday consciousness into a metaphysical world. Sex is an out-of-body experience, which produces a union of the physical and spiritual and which, when shared with someone we love, reinforces and revitalises that love.

But the relationship between sex and consciousness has other implications. The physiological changes that engender the psychological pleasures we enjoy during and after sexual acts are very similar to those achieved by fasting, by meditation, or by ingesting certain narcotics.

The so-called 'Passion Cycle' of desire, lust, sexual passion, orgasm and sexual bonding depends on a complex interplay of chemicals produced in the brain.⁴ The same chemicals are involved in the mind-state changes experienced during transcendental meditation. Similar effects are found in those using narcotics and mind-altering drugs, and in the brains of people deliberately altering their consciousness for religious or spiritual ends.⁵

The Great Rite was specifically designed to tap into all of this and to be a transcendental experience for the participants, in which they ceased to be their mortal selves and instead literally became the Goddess and her consort.

Perhaps, after the main ritual, the others in the crowd came together themselves. Such a communal act of sex, especially in a culture where polyamory was practised, would have reinforced the bonds that held the whole tribe together through the process of sexual reward. While this would have been a culturally important ceremony, there is no reason to suppose that the participants did not enjoy it!

Tikva Frymer-Kensky notes that,

'Sexuality is such an important force for renewal because Sex unites. Sacred Marriage is about union, about the coming together of the many elements that together make a fertile world. Through this act, renewal and regeneration occur when the male component of fertility (Dumuzi) combines with the female component (Inanna), thus unifying the various aspects of cosmos. Male and Female appear as the interlocking pieces which combine to open the riches of the universe. The union of the two principals that Sacred

⁴ 'Dr Jim Pfaus, a psychologist at Concordia University, in Montreal, says the aftermath of lustful sex is similar to the state induced by taking opiates. A heady mix of chemical changes occurs, including increases in the levels of serotonin, oxytocin, vasopressin and endogenous opioids (the body's natural equivalent of heroin). "This may serve many functions, to relax the body, induce pleasure and satiety, and perhaps induce bonding to the very features that one has just experienced all this with", says Dr Pfaus.' (<http://www.oxytocin.org/oxytoc/love-science.html>)

⁵ Bujatti, M. & Biederer, P. *Serotonin, noradrenaline, dopamine metabolites in transcendental meditation-technique*. *Journal of Neural Transmission* Springer Wien, 1976-09-01 (pp257-267)

Marriage signifies, expresses and effects the meeting of the male-female axis of the world.^{6,7}

It was intended for the partners in coitus to be united entirely with the holy couple; that is to say, in the truest sense, to 'become one with God', by a process of psychological transmutation.

⁶ Frymer-Kensky, Tikva. *In the Wake of the Goddesses: Women, Culture and the Biblical Transformation of Pagan Myth*. Ballantine Books. 1993.

⁷ We shall discuss Inanna and Dumuzi in detail in subsequent chapters that explore Sumerian mythology.