

# Section 5 – The Advent of Agriculture

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## The Goddess in Transition

### Nammu: The Sumerian Great Mother

Prior to her devolution, there was only one, transcendent, Great Goddess, who brought everything into being alone. The Sumerians called her Nammu, the Goddess of the Sea.<sup>1,2</sup> She was singular, supreme, unchallenged and unchallengeable, indeed beyond the scope of human comprehension. She was the primordial mother; she had always existed, alone. ‘In the beginning the whole universe was a sea.’ Samuel Noah Kramer said of Nammu:

‘first was the primeval sea (Nammu.) Nothing is said of its origin or birth, and it is not unlikely that the Sumerian conceived it as having existed eternally.’<sup>3</sup>

Nammu is the goddess of the hunter-gatherer woman. She creates life without the aid of a consort. This reflects a time when it was believed that women created life without male assistance. There were no other deities in the pantheon before or beside her, so she was a monotheistic deity.

Reflecting human understanding of reproduction, Nammu bore a pair of deities, female and male twins, Ki and An.<sup>4,5</sup> Originally, these were equals, born at exactly the same instant, locked in coitus. They are an essential pair, which, together, forms a singularity.

Ki, the Earth, was the Great Mother, the Creatrix from whose body everything living flowed. She received the fertilising rain and produced life.<sup>6</sup> An was the sky, from which the rain fell; rain was his metaphorical semen. He impregnated her with the seed from which life would be born, and this correlated to the fresh sweet water that flowed in the rivers. It should be clear that this version of deity is very much informed by the agricultural society that developed it.

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<sup>1</sup> MacKenzie, Donald A. *Myths of Babylonia and Assyria*. Gresham. 1915.

<sup>2</sup> ‘And the Earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep,’ Genesis 1:2. This is a reference to a primordial sea and likely contains a memory of Nammu.

<sup>3</sup> Kramer, Samuel Noah. *History begins at Sumer*. University of Pennsylvania Press. 1981.

<sup>4</sup> Ki is also known as Ninhursag, and sometimes, today, as Ninhursag-Ki.

<sup>5</sup> We use the Sumerian form ‘An’ rather than the later ‘Anu’ in order to differentiate from the much later Celtic deity also called Anu.

<sup>6</sup> The Sumerian word for ‘water’ is the same as that for ‘semen’, literally, ‘a man’s water’.

‘The Great Earth made herself glorious, her body flourished with greenery. Wide Earth put on silver metal and lapis lazuli ornaments, adorned herself with diorite, chalcedony, carnelian, and diamonds. Sky covered the pastures with irresistible sexual attraction, presented himself in majesty. The pure young woman showed herself to the pure Sky, the vast Sky copulated with the wide Earth, the seed of the heroes Wood and Reed he ejaculated into her womb, the Earth, the good cow, received the good seed of Sky in her womb. The Earth, for the happy birth of the Plants of Life, presented herself.’<sup>7</sup>

This passage describes and sexualises the relationship of the fertile Earth to a rain-bearing sky. The parallel is between the fertility of the land and the fertility of women.

The arrangement seems benign: the Sky God cannot make life alone but needs the willing help of the Earth Mother. He does not plunge down from on high and rape the Earth Mother, forcing her to his will as he might if he were all-powerful and dominant.<sup>8</sup> Instead, he courts her, charms her, seduces her. That is because his power, great though it may be, does not govern the Earth. The natural world may reject humanity’s control by storms, catastrophic floods, droughts and other disasters. In mythological terms, An must woo Ki, please her and care for her, in order for the world to be fertile and the people to prosper.

Every farmer and gardener knew that to bring forth crops it was not sufficient simply to scatter seed on the ground and hope for the best. The soil had to be tilled, watered and nourished, and weeds hoed. The Earth has the power to bring forth life but it is up to her whether she does or not, and the only way to ensure this is to respect her, to treat her with love and care. The relationship between Earth Mother and Sky-Father reflects that between land and farmer in the horticultural stage.

In the myth-cycle, however, all was not well for the couple, Ki and An:

‘Before all time, as they lie together, his phallus clasped in her vulva, in the liquid womb of Nammu, a sigh of love escapes them, and rests between their bodies. They make love again and again and Ki is filled with the seed of An; but then the sigh takes the form of Enlil, who becomes greater and greater. Enlil is the Master of Wind, the god of the Air, and as he stretches to separate the Sky from the Earth, he makes it impossible for the lovers Ki and An ever to come together again. An weeps for his lost sister and lover, whom he can never again touch, and his tears drop into the Sea, Nammu. Nammu feels her son’s anguish and reaches out for him, and for the first time, mother and son make love. From their union, a pair of twins is born, male and female, Enki and Ereshkigal.

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<sup>7</sup> Dijk, J. Van *The Birth of Wood and Reed*, *Acta Orientalia* 28. 1964.

<sup>8</sup> And as the later Greek sky-god Zeus would repeatedly do.

Enki we have already encountered: he is lord of Magic, Crafts and sweet water, and Ereshkigal is goddess of knowledge within and becomes the mistress of the Underworld.<sup>9, 10</sup>

In the timelessness of their lovemaking within the womb of Nammu, Ki, the Earth, was filled with An's seed, making her forever fertile. Although he was born of their love, Enlil is not one of their children, in the sense that the seed An plants inside Ki would become. Enlil represents the life the lovers must wake into, chaos and filial disobedience. He is powerful and unruly, an elemental force.

After Enlil separates Ki and An, Nammu compassionately has sex with An, her son, resulting in the birth of another female/male pair, Ereshkigal and Enki. Ki and An were the transcendent representations of the original deity Nammu, divided into female and male elements. Ereshkigal and Enki are the anthropomorphic successors to them.

Ki and An together with Enki and Ereshkigal form a Divine Tetrad, group of four closely-related deities. They are mother and father, daughter and son, all born of the original Great Goddess Nammu. After giving birth to them, Nammu essentially disappears from Sumerian mythology, and her place is taken by Ki.

All the deities, from the original tetrad above to the whole pantheon of Sumer, were not only born of the Great Goddess but were a part of her. The male gods were simply the male part of what was once a transcendent, singular deity that contained all the power of creation, both female and male.

These mythological changes reflected cultural changes brought about by the adoption of agriculture and permanent settlement. Ki and An, born together, are equal. In time, with the rising power of men, being equal would not be enough, and the Sky Father would take on different characteristics.

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<sup>9</sup> Leick, Gwendolyn. *Sex and Eroticism in Sumerian Literature*. Routledge. 1994.

<sup>10</sup> The early Sumerian tongue was not gendered, but many of our records are written in Akkadian, which was. An and Anu refer to the same deity, An in Sumerian, Anu in Akkadian.