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Witchcraft

When one thinks of the word witch, an image comes to mind of an old crone with a pointy black hat, cackling as she stirs her large black cauldron, flying through the sky on her broom. Like the witch of *Hansel and Gretel*, she is a threat to innocence, eating small children as a treat. Or, in the tale of *Rapunzel*, she is a jealous old crone, locking beautiful maidens away to keep them from their place in society. She is evil by nature, shrouded in the mysterious workings of black magic. Yet, concealed in this imagery, is a forgotten tradition of healing, with its roots in the embodiment of the wild feminine spirit, the Great Mother Earth. Where in these images hides the wise woman healers that once were so vital to the existence of man?

These images of witches, though greatly distorted and exaggerated, hold within them the keys to discovering this ancient tradition. The broom, for instance, was used by folk women to sweep out bad energy from homes to make way for the new energy of spring (Storl 9). The concept of the flying witch stems from these early cultures's use of psychotropic herbs for visionary quests that allowed communion with the spirits and divination (Storl 51). The cauldron was representative of the womb of the great goddess that "bore all life forms and took them back again" (Storl 26).

The figure represented to us is indeed a remnant of the goddess worshipers, or fertility cults, but it is only one face of the goddess; that of the death crone. In fact the Goddess was seen as a trinity. She was the old winter crone that in folk cultures was displaced by the beautiful and fertile goddess of spring, who gave forth her bounty as the great Mother, and shriveled like the land into the winter crone again, to begin the cycle anew. (Muller-Eberling, page VII). The time has come for us to do the same, to move beyond the barrenness of death, and embrace the Goddess we have long forgotten.

The Dawn of Fertility Cults

As the glaciers receded from the land, human cultures shifted from big game hunters to small game hunters. This way of hunting was more time consuming and provided less meat, and plant gathering was heightened in importance. Women were the primary gatherers of roots, fruit, bark and birds eggs, while the role of politics (forming alliances, and divvying out meat) fell to the men (Storl 1). Therefore it was women who first began to learn the medicinal qualities that the plant world had to offer. This fact is supported by the dedication of the first book of herbal remedies, the *Papyrus Ebers*, to Isis, the Goddess of healing in Egypt: "This is the book for the healing of all diseases. May Isis heal me as she healed Horus." (Brooke 2, 16)

These early cultures lived as a part of nature, and relied on its bounty. Elisabeth Brooke, an Herbalist, describes the role of woman in these early cultures:

As the primary providers of care, woman reared children, nursed the sick and took care of the dying. Woman was seen as the source of life, mother and guardian of the tribe. Her body swelled in pregnancy, she bled each month, but did not die from her wound. And she produced milk that nourished the helpless infant (Brooke, page 13).

In this way, woman was seen as caregiver, protector and the creator of life, and her role was relegated to the sacred. In all cultures existing at this time, some form of the Goddess was found depicted in their art, especially depictions of the pregnant female. (Brooke, page 14)

As the population grew and boundaries between tribes became more pronounced, the ability to cultivate seeds became a necessity. The refuse piles where seeds and tubers were combined with ashes, excrement, and other trash provided the perfect conditions for the accidental cultivation of plants. Soon, cultures were turning the soil, making small mounds, and planting seeds that they had saved. Animals were fenced in to be kept as food, and eventually tamed. All of these activities lead to the shift from that of the hunter/gatherer based societies to the agrarian. (Storl 1)

This shift represented the first division between wilderness and cultivated nature. Hedgerows were planted not only to prevent the escape of livestock, but maintained a boundary between that which was tamed and that which was not (Storl 2). The land beyond the hedgerow became a metaphor for the

beyond - a place where wild animals, wild men (the remaining hunter/gatherers), spirits, Gods and Goddesses roamed (Storl 7).

The relationship to these Gods and Goddesses transitioned from one of benevolence and friendship to one of fear and awe, as the fertility of the land became a more dire concern. No longer could the tribe move on if the bounty of nature became depleted. Worship moved from an informal dialog to a deliberate act of worshiping. Plowing of the fields was considered “impregnating Mother Earth”; in fact the word *cultivate* means to ‘service the gods.’ (Storl, page 3)

Although life was not as directly involved with the wilderness outside the hedgerow, it was no less important to the agrarian societies. As Wolf-Dieter Storl points out:

People were conscious of the fact that their small islands of communities, which had been carved out of the primordial forest, were in and of themselves weak and powerless. Thanks only to the boundless power of the wilderness were life and survival possible. (Storl, page 4)

Storl also notes out that wood, for fires, animals and most importantly medicinal plants continued to be hunted and gathered from the wild forests (4). The role of collecting medicinal plants continued to fall to the women.

The wilderness also served as a source of spiritual sustenance – a place where humans could go to commune with the spiritual realm. Because medicinal plants existed here, their properties were believed to be attributed to spirits and deities who would aid the women gatherers with knowledge of how they should be harvested, and used. This intimate connection between spirit and plant draped the art of medicine making in the spiritual realm, infusing the properties of plants with magic. Plants could be used for curing wounds as well as changing the weather, accessing the spirit world, and bringing harm to enemies (Ratsch 81). From this tradition, the mystery surrounding the witch was born.

The Medicine of the Wild

“Witchcraft medicine stems from shamanism and has its roots in paleolithic times. Witchcraft medicine is mythological, ritualistic, and strongly feminine. Witchcraft medicine is religion.”

(Ratsch 81)

Little knowledge remains today of witchcraft medicine. What is known is speculative and mostly derived from sources that were naturally biased. Historical records indicate that women throughout the Middle Ages, referred to as "old wives" used "herbal medicine, ointments, collections of stones as amulets and inscriptions as charms (Brooke 17)." The rest of the knowledge about this ancient tradition is a collection from wise tales, folk lore, fairy tales, and anthropological studies. But, much of the knowledge of this tradition has been lost, making what remains all the more valuable.

It has been speculated that the most important domains of medicine in witchcraft included aphrodisiacs, birth control and abortifacients, poison, medicine, inebriants, and life extending and rejuvenating elixirs (Ratsch 81). Knowledge about the plant's uses were most likely obtained through careful observation about the shape of the plant, and where and how it tended to grow. For example, St. John's wort (*Hypericum perforatum*) grows only in direct sunlight, germinates only in the sun, and blooms in bright sunny looking flowers near time of the summer solstice, the time of greatest light. These observations would have led to the conclusion that this plant has a brightening effect on those who consume it, due to its high concentration of light (Storl 55). Other sources of knowledge would have included experimentation, communication with the plant spirit, and information passed on from a Grandmother or Mother (Storl 30).

Aphrodisiacs played an especially important role for the fertility rituals conducted each spring, distantly remembered today as May day and epitomized by the dance around the May pole. Such plants included sweet woodruff (*Asperula odorata*), vervain (*Verbena officinalis*) and the slightly narcotic henbane (*Hyoscyamus niger*) (Storl 64, 14, 95).

Inebriants, however, are the most commonly associated plants with witchcraft, due to the immensity of power these plants contain. Though it is certain that these toxic plants were sometimes used to kill, their most important use would have been in accessing the spirit world to appease a vengeful ancestor, gain visionary knowledge, or influence the weather (Storl 51, 54). Alan Eames

points out that beer, one of the earliest psychoactive preparations known to mankind," was a gift to women from a Goddess, never a male God, and women remained bonded in complex religious relationships with feminine deities who blessed the brew vessels. (Buhner xiv)" Other inebriating plants such as henbane, and datura were placed in complex herbal mixtures and made into ointments, which were applied externally (Ratsch 132).

In mentioning the witch's use of inebriants, it is also important to note the wisdom of Paracelsus, in that "it is only the dosage that determines whether or not something is medicine or poison." The formulas in which these plants were used are not known, but it can perhaps be speculated that many of the negative connotations of black magic were not the intention of the witch, but due to an improper following of her formulas. (Ratsch 82)

The Fall of the Feminine

As humans began to form cities and empires in the Middle East, and had less direct involvement with the natural world, the role of the Goddess became less important, and was soon usurped by the masculine, monotheistic God. The teachings of the messiah Christ spread like wildfire through out Europe, and soon reached the remaining Goddess cultures of the north. These early Christians, following the teachings of Jesus, held women in equal status with men (Brooke 27). Women were allowed to continue their role as healers as long as they did so in devotion to the virgin Mother in place of their Goddess of fertility (Storl 36, 43). In this way, the practices of the Goddess cultures stayed alive.

However, the power of these goddess worshipers soon became an obstacle for the Church and the endured tolerance of the sacred feminine ceased. Missionaries reported that woman were the greatest hindrance to conversion. As Storl points out, "the witch "was still connected to the wilderness outside the fence (42)." The Church removed all parts of the Bible that gave women equality with men. These scriptures are called the Gnostic gospels. (Brooke, Medicine Women 17-18) Other passages were changed to reflect the new doctrine, hailing the masculine as supreme. For instance the passage

that once stated, “Thou shalt not suffer a poisoner to live” was changed to “Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live,” by King James I, associating woman with evil, but not men(Powell).

This time also brought about the systematic destruction of all goddess temples and icons. Missionaries were responsible for bringing about this change, and securing Christianity as the only religion. The following prohibitions were listed in a text entitled *Indiculus superstitionum et pagarum*, written as a guide for missionaries, in the eighth century:

- Invocation of the dead or questioning of the dead
- Rituals and sacrifice in the forests, groves, on trees, stones, springs, and crossroads
- The spring festival in February
- Singing magical words
- Moon magic of the women
- Oracle prophecy and divination (Storl 35)

The Inquisition and Witch Hunts

With the coming of the plague, and the explosive outbreak of syphilis, the Catholic Church (fueled by its own anxiety) tightened its belt even further against the fertility cults; believing that these outbreaks were punishment for allowing the religious practices of these groups to survive. The horrors that these pandemics brought about were rationalized by the Church through the amplification of the Devil, or Satan. In this way all religious practices that involved the unexplainable or uncontrollable qualities of the spiritual realm (such as goddess cults, village shamans, etc) were thrust under the shadow of the Devil. Because syphilis was a sexually transmitted disease, the fertility cults, especially the women members, were preyed upon. (Storl 36-38)

In this period, the innate healing abilities of women, passed down since antiquity from mother to daughter, were debased as gifts from the devil. Their abilities, once so valuable, had no place in the society created by the Catholic Church. They were outcasts, and heretics in this new religion, and the focus of the inquisition was to exterminate them from society. Millions of women were tortured, raped, humiliated and killed, many of them little more than superstitious country housewives, forced to

confess to worshipping a devil they did not perceive. If they were able to withstand this torture without confession, they were killed anyway, for who could withstand such torture without the help of the devil?

Though some were able to continue their healing tradition within the practice of midwifery, most were forced to practice in secret, on the fringes of society, if they survived at all. Their spirit lives on today only as the black capped, ugly old hag taped up in windows at Halloween.

Returning to Medicine of The Wild

In a time when healing has become little more than a chemical sideshow, the healing traditions of witchcraft are needed more than ever. Witchcraft is based on the spiritual and magical nature of plants rather than individual constituents and their actions against specific diseases. Storl defines witchcraft as, “the practice of becoming whole.” (storl, page 39) It involves the reconnection of the individual to the spiritual web made up of plants, animals and spirits. It's an understanding that comes from observing, listening and respecting the voices of the plants that heal us. It's a tradition that respects the voices of the old - a direct link to our ancient roots through the voices of our mothers past, perhaps leading to the greatest mother of them all - the earth.

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