

Reviews

Searching for the Roots of Female Spirituality

A review of Patricia Monaghan's *The New Book of Goddesses and Heroines* by Marianita C. Villariba

“Today, we are all together, sisters and brothers, daughters and sons, grandmothers and grandfathers, lovers and partners, friends and neighbours to reflect on the many blessings we have. Let us then call on the oldest, the Great She, whom we call Isis and the Mother of Perpetual Help. As we call on the Great She, let us thank her for inspiring us to become strong and steadfast. Let us express our gratitude to Her for guiding us through the maze of uncertainties, for helping us overcome our crises and heal our traumas, for enabling us to collectively celebrate our daily lives, and empowering us to welcome challenges.”

This invocation is part of the prayer I am composing for my family and relatives as we prepare to celebrate the 50th wedding anniversary of my parents in Lucena, my hometown which is a coconut-processing city south of Metro Manila (Philippines).

Reaching my 47th year, I have decided to reorient my spiritual life. I have been looking at the many manifestations of female godliness and spent time reading literature on female spirituality. Recently, I found a very valuable book in the collection of the Isis International Resource Center, *The New Book of Goddesses and Heroines* by Dr. Patricia Monaghan.

In the 20 years that Patricia Monaghan has been conducting scholarly research on spirituality, she has produced one of the most significant body

of works on women and meaning. As a pioneer of the women's spiritual movement, Patricia Monaghan has worked towards accessing information that make women and their contribution to spirituality and religion visible and respectable.

The rigor and devotion that went into the book's three editions is a story by itself. The author started copying notes manually on 3" x 5" cards to produce a manuscript that stacked up over two feet tall. She wrote the first edition in 1981 with an electric typewriter. In 1989, a computer search in major libraries produced the second edition with an index and art layout. In the third edition (1997), fast retrieval of new information became possible with online searches through multiple library holdings from a single terminal. The tedious work of recording, alphabetising, spell-checking, artwork layout and indexing were made easy with computer technology.

But technology made the study only less labour-intensive. The key to meeting the objective of the study was her feminist perspective on scholarship. Sexual stereotypes still existed and many encyclopedias of mythology concentrated on male divinities, dismissing female ones with the briefest of mentions. Patricia found that "the names of the goddesses are still infrequently mentioned; a hero, his name carefully recorded, still serves as "the earth goddess" or "his mother." A god, his name carefully recorded, still mates with someone called "a goddess of the land" or "a princess." This later interaction then makes the goddess into "the wife" of the god—even when the intercourse occurred once and included force, which would likely be called rape. An aged goddess is described as "ugly," a self-possessed one is labeled "overbearing" while a maiden is "beautiful" and a sexu-

ally active one is "fertile." Thus she concludes that the language of mythology reference books remains permeated with the attitudes of patriarchal scholarship."

What I find important in the third edition are the inclusion of major cultural groups of each continent, the exposition of how the culture of goddesses punctuated the change and development of human values, and the various photographs taken of female icons and

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goddesses found in many temples and archeological sites.

The book takes us as far back as 7000 B.C., where we discover that many civilisations in Africa, Asia, the Pacific, the Americas, and Europe had a common denominator, the culture of spirituality. Within this culture of spirituality, common to most of the people was the belief in a creator divinity. This creator developed into two primary divinities, a mother goddess connected to earth and human fertility, and a father god associated with celestial phenomena. The creative power of the female was highly valued and the worship of the female divinity emerged as a key spiritual force before the major religions were established.

The advent of agriculture in the various continents and the progress

of migration from original lands to other lands produced thousands of stories of the cultures of goddesses and heroines, mostly preserved as myths and folktales. The stories and rites of spirituality among many civilisations illumine the role divine myths played in daily rituals, created multiple roles for human deities in societies and tried to define what is human in divinities and divine in human beings.

There are specific references in the book that interest me, those of shamans, who were mostly females. Various religious conceptions share a vision of a tripartite world: the middle world where humans live, the lower world where immortal female shamans are found, and the upper world where the souls of the dead wait till their rebirth. I have been studying Filipino shamans, specifically the *babaylan* in the Philippines and her sister counterparts in East and Southeast Asia, because they have helped me find the precolonial and pre-Christian models for female heroism. With the third edition of this book and its 1,500 goddesses, I now have a wider field for studying the female shamans.

I will close this review with the story of Yhi, from the Karraur, an Australian aboriginal group, hoping it will serve as a good creation story for children. My immediate objective is to be able to share interesting stories with my seven-year-old daughter, Laraine, especially during bedtime when I try to get her to drop the television remote control and regulate, if not terminate, her growing obsession with Western cartoons and female models like Snow White.

The Story of Yhi

The goddess Yhi is the goddess of light and creation. She went to sleep in the Dreamtime, before everything was created. Suddenly, a whistle startled the goddess. She

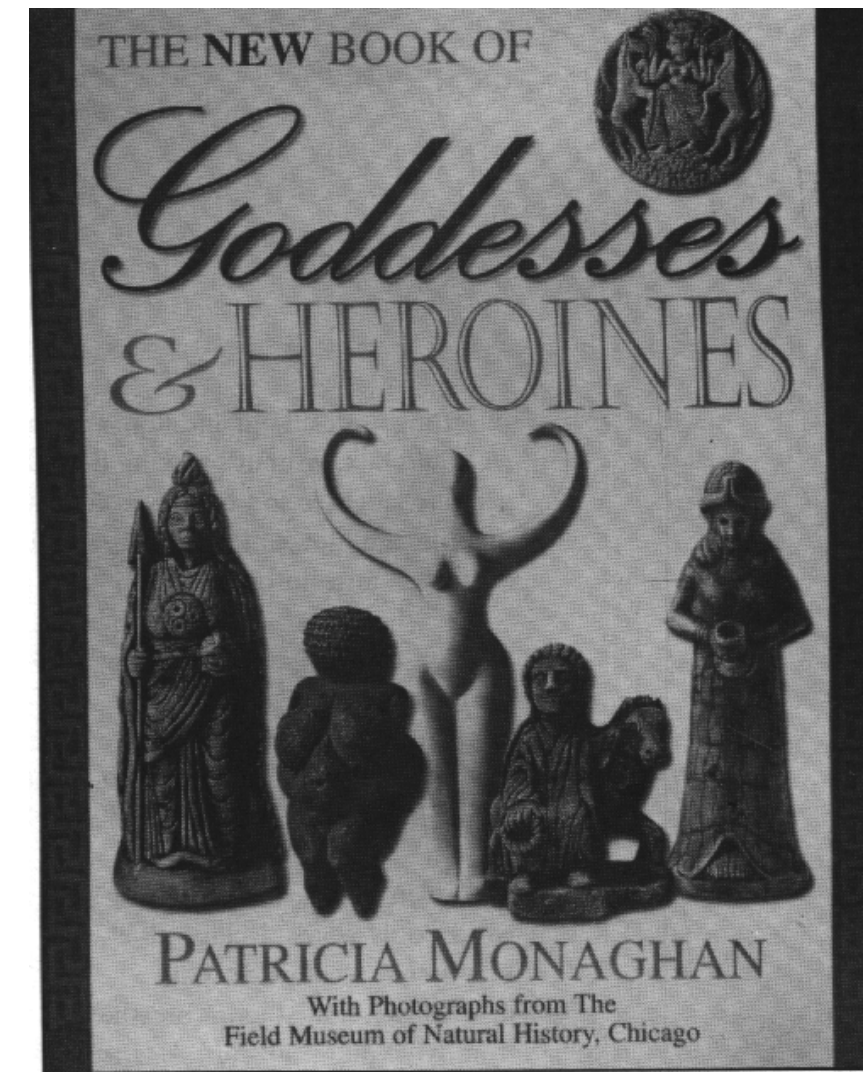
took a deep breath and opened her eyes, flooding the world with light. The earth stirred under her warm rays. Yhi drifted down to this new land, walking north, south, east, west. As she did, plants sprang up from her footprints. She walked the world's surface until she had stepped everywhere, until every inch was covered with green. Then the goddess sat to rest on the treeless Nullarbor Plain.

As she glanced around, she realised that the new plants could not move, and she desired to see something dance. Seeking that dancing life, she descended beneath the earth, where she found evil spirits who tried to sing her to death. But they were not as powerful as Yhi. Her warmth melted the darkness, and tiny forms began to move there. The forms turned into butterflies and bees and insects that swarmed around her in a dancing mass. She led them forth into the sunny world.

But there were still caves of ice, high in the mountains in which other beings rested. Yhi spread her light into them, one at a time. She stared into the cave's black interiors until water formed. Then she saw something move—something, and another thing....Soon the entire world was dancing with life.

Then in her golden voice, Yhi spoke. She told them she would go home to her world and turned herself into a ball of light, sinking below the horizon. As she disappeared, darkness fell upon the earth and the new creatures felt fear. There was sorrow and mourning, and finally sleep. Since Yhi never intended to abandon her creation, dawn came and the sleepy creatures woke to see light breaking in the east.

For eons of Dreamtime, every being lived in peace but a vague sadness began to fill them. Yhi felt sorry for the beings and returned to ask the creatures what was wrong.



Wombat wanted to wiggle along the ground. Kangaroo wanted to fly. Bat wanted wings. Lizard wanted legs. Seal wanted to swim and so did others. Yhi gave every being what they asked for and then went back to her skyhome.

But she had one other task to complete: the creation of woman. She had already embodied thought in male form and set him wandering the earth. But nothing—not the plants, not the insects, not the birds or beasts or fish seemed like him. He was lonely.

Yhi went to him one morning as he slept near a grass tree. He slept fitfully full of strange dreams. As he emerged from his dreaming he saw the flower stalk on the grass

shining with sunlight. He was drawn to the tree, as were all the earth's other creatures. Reverent and astonished, they watched as the power of Yhi concentrated itself on the flower stalk. The flower stalk began to move rhythmically—to breathe. Then it changed form, and became a woman. Slowly emerging into the light, the first woman gave her hand to the first man.

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