

The Fertility Notion in Gilgamesh

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Abstract: The world views that Gilgamesh reflects about birth, death and regeneration are in fact imitations of nature and since nature was the source of blessing and at the same time the fount of disasters, the narrative sees the divine seated in nature. Thus, according to Gilgamesh for the ancient Mesopotamians the imitatio dei was based on imitation from nature and the divine modality for this text is defined by the fertility cult. In other words, the mythology that this region presents is part of a fertility cult that revolves around the worship of the gods.

Key words: Gilgamesh, mythology, fertility concept, disasters, worship

INTRODUCTION

Creation myths are perception-reflectors as they could record and reflect the perceptions of people of their contemporary time-like a cinematographer, creation myths have captured motions, looks and perceptions of our ancestors; the lens of this cinematography is human consciousness. In this way, the worldviews that Gilgamesh reflects about birth, death and regeneration are in fact imitations of nature and since nature was the source of blessing and at the same time the fount of disasters, the text sees the divine seated in nature. Thus, according to Gilgamesh for the ancient Mesopotamians the imitatio dei was based on imitation from nature and the divine modality for this text is defined by the fertility cult. In other words, the mythology that this region presents is part of a fertility cult that revolves around the worship of the gods. Accordingly, like other ancient civilizations and societies, Mesopotamia was host to numerous gods and spirits that ruled the hearts and minds of the populace and the Mesopotamians saw the presence of the divine in concepts like love, justice and punishment. Moreover, the divine was present in nature since the people lived off nature: the sky, the earth and the waters; stars, moon and the sun and any natural entity that helped them live, reproduce and thrive. In this respect, the notion of fertility was a basic inspiration for producing many texts like Gilgamesh. Mesopotamia is one of the birth places of archaic human civilization. Among the myths from around the world, one of the most ancient human cultural testimonies belongs to this geography: Gilgamesh is a narrative which discloses different facets of Mesopotamian world views through its different layers of meaning and its background narratives. In other words, reading Gilgamesh discloses the interwoven pattern of cultural mosaics of Mesopotamia. As Leeming asserts, the

ancient Mesopotamian world view is a collage, made up of myths and religions from several intertwined cultures that through many millennia and centuries inhabited the same geography and assimilated each other's cultural and religious understandings along with stories and oral traditions. We can observe in Gilgamesh that the people of Mesopotamia believed that their lives and their world were controlled by gods and in times of hardship they asked for help from the deities that they believed in. In this way they constructed temples-like the temple of Ishta-for these deities; the deities received particular services and offerings and in temples there were priests to tend the gods and to hold the rituals. Also, in Gilgamesh we can witness the process of human creation by the Mother Goddess Aruru, whom Anu asks to create a human equal to Gilgamesh in response to the prayers of the people: the goddess washes her hands, then takes a pinch of clay and creates Enkidu. In addition, it should be noted that to comprehend the divine and the myth of the deluge in Gilgamesh, we must pay attention to the role of its donor source. As Tigay asserts, the similarity between Atrahasis and Gilgamesh points to their interdependence, or at the very least, one can assume a source common to both texts. For instance, the time setting of Gilgamesh is far later than the great deluge and therefore in this text the initial details of the deluge are not well illustrated. But reading Atrahasis before Gilgamesh helps us to comprehend the divine order and the deluge account in Gilgamesh well, like the intertextual links between the Iliad, Odyssey and Aeneid. According to Atrahasis and Gilgamesh, the creation of humans is purposeful in two aspects: first as Andrew George asserts, the ancient Mesopotamians believed that the purpose of the creation of the human race was to serve the gods (Andrew, 2003): "let man bear the load of the gods" (Stephanie, 1989). Besides, according to Atrahasis and Gilgamesh, the

creation of humankind brings equilibrium and order: the emergence of Enkidu brings about the end of oppression of Uruk by the semi-god Gilgamesh and in the earlier narrative, Atrahasis, the creation of humans relieves the divine order and frees the junior gods from difficult agricultural work.

In addition, Gilgamesh introduces cultivated food as a factor of civilization. Gilgamesh attempts to reflect the qualities of primitive man and depict the way wild primordial humankind can reach to the civilized status. Tigay asserts that the creation account of Enkidu and his features are modeled on the ancient Mesopotamians' idea of the primordial man who "how to eat bread... knew not". In this way, Gilgamesh defines a connection between the mother archetype, creation, birth and agriculture. In this text we see that Mother Goddess Aruru is in charge of the creation of humans. Considering the vegetational essence of Mesoamerica, the presence of Mother Goddesses in Gilgamesh opens up three interconnected aspects: first, the significance of the Mother Goddess in this narrative reveals the bond that the ancient Mesopotamian agricultural pattern of perception creates between woman and growth. In other words, this text not only highlights the role of woman as provider of generations but it also perceives nature and earth as mother figures from which seeds grow and turn into vegetation and life or in Eliade's terms, Earth is assimilated to a woman figure (Mircea, 1981). Not only food and life comes from earth but also, "born of the Earth, man, when he dies, returns to his mother" (Mircea, 1981). Second, the text depicts the idea of feminine and maternal sacredness as Eliade asserts, this "sacrality increases its power in agricultural societies" (Mircea, 1981). This is because as mentioned earlier, the priority in vegetations is fertility, growth and care. Third, in this text, the Mother-Goddess acts as intermediary between nature and culture: she ties the profane to the sacred. In other words, according to this narrative, not only does human civilization springs from a Mother Goddess but also Gilgamesh establishes the pillars of human culture based on the concept of the sacred through being connected to this divine mother. In addition, the definition of mother-figure in this narrative indicates the culture's definition of woman: as Jung asserts, the qualities associated with the Mother Archetype are "maternal solicitude and sympathy; the magic authority of the female; the wisdom and spiritual exaltation that transcend reason; any helpful instinct or impulse; all that is benign, all that cherishes and sustains, that fosters growth and fertility". In Gilgamesh, after the creation process is completed by the Mother Goddess, we can observe how the narrative depicts the implicit and symbolic role of Shamhat, who is one of the women from

the temple of Ishtar. Rivkah Harris believes that Shamhat is named, given individuality and personhood like deities and in the narrative holds a significant role (Rivkah, 2000). As Rivkah Harris asserts, Shamhat has a twin role: as a sexual creature and as a maternal figure; her first task is more explicitly characterized by the hunter: "uncradle your bosom". However, her second role is almost implicit and symbolic: Enkidu is untaught and immature; "Shamhat teaches him the basics that every child must learn: eating, drinking, dressing himself. Shamhat later shares her clothing with the naked Enkidu" (Rivak, 2000). She is the figure who acts an important role in teaching Enkidu, the archetypal non-civilized wild man, the basics that every child must learn in order to enter human society: eating, drinking and dressing. She takes care of him and guides him away from nature to society: in this way, Shamhat introduces culture to the primitive man. She emphasizes the decency of urban food, clothing washing and the importance of being in society. Shamhat is associated with Ishtar and her temple. In Leeming's terms the most significant of the Mesopotamian goddesses is Inanna or Ishtar. She is the mistress of heaven and the lady of the date clusters. As Leeming asserts, assimilated with the Akkadian Semitic cultures, Ishtar, along with An and Enlil, is one of the most powerful of deities. She is the patroness of Uruk, where she has a temple. Ishtar is the goddess of sexuality and reproduction and was vital for the Mesopotamian ritual of the sacred marriage (David, 2004). Besides, the women figures of Gilgamesh have important roles in escorting the hero of the narrative to pass his way to maturity. His mother, Ishtar and Utanapishtim's wife directly and indirectly turn out to be effective in the quest of Gilgamesh through nurturing, motivating, guiding and helping him.

GILGAMESH: THE DIVINE

In Eliade's terms, for religious man of ancient societies, the existence of the world meant that it was created by the gods and the existence of the world itself meant something and wanted to say something. As he asserts, for the archaic human, the world was neither mute nor an inactive thing without purpose or significance; on the contrary, for religious man, the cosmos lived and spoke. Eliade explains that within this worldview, the life of the cosmos was the evidence of its sanctity because the cosmos was created by the gods and the gods demonstrate themselves to men through cosmic life. Based on such a mentality, at a certain stage of culture human considers of himself as a microcosm (Mircea, 1987). Therefore, in mythology as Campbell asserts: "concepts and words are symbols as are visions, rituals

and images are” (Joseph, 1976) and accordingly, through these symbols a transcendent reality is mirrored. In this manner, Eliade claims that the “vertical posture” of humankind has a significant role in attracting human attention to the heavens and this leads to transcendental perceptions (Eliade, 1981). Besides, fascination with the sky as the realm of the divine led some ancient civilizations to astrological explanations of celestial bodies, whose movements mirrored events on earth. The presence of a Sun God, the Moon God, Dumuzi and the Babylonian Venus Ishtar, indicate Gilgamesh’s awareness of these celestial properties of the universe; the celestial bodies of the sky are the images of the divine for the ancient Mesopotamians. In the narrative we are told that Gilgamesh passes twelve double hours (time) to journey the path of the Sun God through the underworld, corresponding to the Sumerian number of months. As Jung asserts, archaic civilizations had an imperative need to assimilate all outer sense experiences to inner psyche events (Gustav, 1991). Correspondingly, sky could signify a lot more than other atmospheres: sky is home to sun, moon, wind, rain, thunder and lightening; sky is the source of divine blessing and divine anger. In Gilgamesh we learn that “the Sumerian term for the universe was an-ki, literally the combination of an (heaven) and ki (earth) which emerged as a primordial mountain from the maternal subterranean waters of the goddess Nammu. An and ki as male and female, conceived Enlil and presumably, the other Anunnaki, the major gods” (Leeming, 2010). As Leeming explains, “heaven and earth had to be separated from each other in order that further creation could take place between them.” So, it was that the sky god, Anu, raised the sky and the area of heaven above it and the air god, Enlil, took his mother, the earth, down, leaving the appropriate space. Considering the issues mentioned, we can observe that the depiction of “creation of the world” and its initiation in Gilgamesh is based on its culture’s awareness of birth and fertility. Leeming asserts that the sexual impulse is the fundamental motif that is depicted in the union and separation of heaven and earth myths. This impulse and fertility awareness has a transcendent nature in which the sky God is a divine father figure who protects and whose anger can devastate.

GILGAMESH: DEATH AWARENESS

As in the dramatic farewell between Gilgamesh and Enkidu, humans dramatize the reality of death as it terminates the bond between the deceased and the survivors. When there was not enough comprehension of natural phenomena, early humans must have observed

and interpreted death and the rebirth of nature through the passing of time and climatic or seasonal changes and compared these observations with their own existence. As we can see in Gilgamesh, vegetation life was compared to human and animal life. Even sun and moon could go through death and rebirth cycles in the archaic human imagination. Thus, early Mesopotamians speculated that like vegetation life or like sun and moon, they could have life after death. Also, according to the mentality that Gilgamesh reflects, the ancient Mesopotamians speculated on the reason of human death that is to take place inevitably after human creation. Based on the desire for immortality, the solution for this bewilderment is the promise of life after death through numinous and ritualistic experiences. This feeling of helplessness in front of death is the vivid image that Gilgamesh projects from its cultural intelligence and the remedy that it prescribes is to establish a strong bond with the culture’s fertility cult. In Gilgamesh life is seen as a path that should be traveled even in afterlife in the underworld as illustrated by the movements of the sun in the underworld from West to East. At the end of the path in this life, death is inevitable and after death the human returns back to Mother Earth. The world that the departed should travel into after death is the underworld and after one gets into this domain, the return is impossible but the quality of the afterlife depends on the life that the individual has in this world. According to both texts, the underworld is a frightful place but the people who have a fertile life in this world have an afterlife that is easy and luxurious.

In addition, both narratives believe that the great flood was the result of the early humans’ ignorance in front of the gods. In other words, this narrative believes that flood is the consequence of the loss of the essential bond with the sacred. In the flood myth the divine washes the universe and everything in it: the gods provide death and rebirth for the world through the great powers of divine existence in nature. In addition, the flood account in the creation myths is the result of transcendental perception of humans about natural phenomena like the sky, rain and water which comprise the initial ingredients of the flood accounts. In this way, Leeming asserts that psychologically, the myth of the great deluge speaks to our own sense of guilt as failed beings and of our desire for a second chance. Therefore, the presence of a flood myth in Gilgamesh is part of the text’s awareness of death and rebirth. In this way, Leeming asserts that flood myths and reemergence motifs are symbolically associated with human genesis from the waters of the womb. If we consider Campbell’s assertion that myths are the product of human awareness and compare this to what Leeming asserts about the nature of flood accounts, a flood myth

is the result of human experience plus an awareness of fertility and birth which revolve around a hope for rebirth and immortality. Thus, the flood myth represents the everlasting hope for a new beginning within us. Moreover, the flood myth depicts the contrast between nature and human culture.

CONCLUSION

Agriculture had a significant role in civilizing and settling the human race and as one of the primary cradles of world civilization, Mesopotamia reflected its vegetural groundwork in its textual assets like Gilgamesh. Accordingly, the worldviews that Gilgamesh presents about birth, death and regeneration are in fact an imitation from nature. Thus, the imitatio dei for Gilgamesh was based on the imitation of nature. In this respect, the notion of fertility was a basic pillar in producing these texts. This narrative recognizes its culture's cultivated crop as a sign and a constituent of civilization: bread and ale are human vegetural accomplishments for which a lot of labor has been consumed in the historical line of human cultural evolution. Hence, they are the fruits of the physical and psychic labor of civilization. Gilgamesh reveals how agriculture shaped human culture and human perceptions. Therefore, since Mother Nature was a source of blessing as well as a fountain of disasters,

it was a home to the numinous, who maintains a dominant significance. In the worldviews that Gilgamesh presents, fertility has affected the nature of beliefs and perceptions.

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