

## An Evaluation of the Historical Importance of Fertility and Its Reflection in Ancient Mythology

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### Abstract

Myths are reflective of human concerns and needs during ancient times. By reviewing them, it turns out that many human problems today, have a historical background. Among the main themes of ancient mythologies, fertility and reproduction have various representations in ancient civilizations. The purpose of this paper was to review myths and common symbols of fertility and reproduction in ancient civilizations and evaluate the reasons of their continuous importance in different cultures. The data in this review study was obtained by scrutinizing the related literature. The gathered data indicated the multiplicity and variety of fertility symbols in ancient myths. Most ancient fertility symbols were inspired by the nature and some of them like earth and water were common in mythology of different civilizations. Therefore, the symbols consolidate the concept of conformity between human reproductive concerns and the nature's necessities.

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### Introduction

If we conceive society as a cultural concept in which the people's behaviors are representative of the types of relationships they have with each other, then it necessitates evaluating the cultural aspect of each event for investigating its social dimension. Therefore, in order to have an accurate understanding of fertility and infertility as a social phenomenon and for evaluating its social dimensions, a careful review of the event's cultural background is required. There are various definitions of culture. Patricia Marshall on her part defines it as "consistent ways in which people experience, interpret, and respond to the world around" (1). Robert Murphy believed that "culture means the total body of tradition borne by a society and transmitted from generation to generation. It thus refers to the norms, values and standards by which people act, and it includes the ways distinctive in each society of ordering the world and rendering it intelligible. Culture is a set

of mechanisms for survival, but it provides us also with a definition of reality. It is the matrix into which we are born; it is the anvil upon which our persons and destinies are forged" (2).

Edward Taylor, the English anthropologist, defined culture as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs, and many other capabilities and habits acquired by...[members] of society" (3).

The definition of Taylor which seems to be comprehensive and simple is actually descriptive in essence. He counts a number of phenomena in collective life and provides his definition of culture. In fact, the important feature of his definition is that it lacks the normative aspect. In his opinion, culture is the totality of human social life. Therefore, his definition is not restrictive and exclusive, *i.e.* it does not restrict the concept of culture to particular communities and include just some individuals in this context. The collective

nature of the definition is its prominent characteristic. Furthermore, he perceives culture as something that can be acquired, not inherited. In other words, biological aspects do not have a role in this definition (4).

Based on the assumption, for accurate understanding of the social status of fertility, we are forced to explore the constructive components of culture. Art, mythology, religions and traditions as the configurations of the communities' culture were always reflective of the evolution in human beings, in their needs, desires and beliefs. The everlasting effects of past human history dating back to the early paintings on the walls of caves are all indicative of the traditions and current rituals.

The concept of fertility can be followed up from the beginning of creation and in all ancient mythologies, this great concept is duly manifested. Fertility has a deep and strong relationship with the perennial human desire to survive and perpetuate his existence. The deep-seated desire of human for reproduction, his questions and imaginations about development and the importance of reproduction in his life, are clearly observable in ancient myths and civilizations. For clarifying the sociological significance of infertility, with an emphasis on constructive components of communities' cultures, we made an attempt to refer to the meanings of myths and legends of ancient fertility symbols in great civilizations (5, 6).

**The concept of myth:** Mircea Eliade believes that living myth in traditional societies is a sacred and divine story that features the work of gods and supernaturals, or the ancestors who created the culture from the beginning, the timeless time. Therefore, it is the narration about the genesis of world, animals, plants, mankind, institutions, traditions and the reasons for their existence besides the whole creation of the universe. Mythological time, unlike historical time, is not linear, but is reversible and this is an inherent characteristic of the myth. Since myth is a constant model, it should be repeated consecutively (5, 6).

However, till the emergence of new schools in mythology, myth seemed to be something meaningless and absurd from the viewpoints of those who saw it from the outside (contrary to the belief of people who lived with myths). This concept of myth which was in opposition with history is popular from ancient Greek time up to now. In ancient Greece, Mythos (mythos derived from the

Latin mythos, Greek mythos, meaning dumb and silent) was opposite of logos (word, speech, delicate and subtle speech, wisdom and intellect) and the Persian cultures considered myth (mythic, invalid and void) as the Arabic equivalent for historia (but not meaning as story or history, rather as the second meaning of the word which equates to absurd and nonsensical stories) (7).

But despite the perceived absurdity, the myth, ignoring the historicity of the today's world still remains stable. What is the secret of its immortality? Perhaps this question can be answered by the fact that the myths never die and they occur from time to time with new appearance because the concept of myth is the everlasting obsession of human mind that never abandons him and provokes such questions in his mind that he never finds perfect and satisfactory answers for them. The mythologists have found the trace of such historical questions regarding life, death and creation in cryptic novels and plays in our era (8).

There is an inextricable bind between history and myth and several historians believe that no boundary can separate the world of history from the world of myth (The world of poetry) (9). In fact, myth is a powerful and inscrutable source and as the play director, it assigns different roles to the nominated actors of the history and thereby becomes the founder of the history's foundation. This is the main reason that the ancient myths, not as superstitious and nonsensical story telling but as the concept that Eliade and other mythologists suggested, always remain perpetual.

Through exploration in the myths, human concerns which are inspired by the surrounding nature and the imagination can be discovered. Ancient myths were designed to harmonize the mind and body. Mind is able to have an eccentric journey to old times and wishes to have objects that the body does not need them. Myths and rituals are tools to make a compromise between mind and body and adapt the life style of people with nature's restrictions (10).

**First creation, goddesses and nature:** Symbols of fertility in ancient mythology have a history as long as the creation of first myths. Primarily, the myths were about description of the world's creation. They depicted how the tree, the man, the sun and all the other things came into existence. This part of the mythology belonged to the time in which the man was bewildered and frightened in the expansive world and wanted to give meaning

to the extensive environment around him. However, with the progress of science and rationality, less attention was allocated to this part of the mythology. Today, to validate new discoveries, a return to mythological roots is required (11).

Through the study of mythology of ancient civilizations, we understand that most of myths and vaunted goddesses are the ones that are mainly connected with fertility and muliebrity. This is the reason that the only respected and worshiped goddess in ancient Egypt is the one called "Maat", and her symbol is a hieroglyphic sign called "ankh". Today, the shape of "ankh" identifies female gender (12).

In ancient Iran, the oldest creation myth is a narrative about death of Keyumars and the growth of "Mandrake" from his semen after forty years. In Iranian belief, human beings or the first man and woman in the world called "Mashya and Mashyana" were created from the dual root of this plant in the earth. According to mythologists, the number forty is a symbol of female fertility because the number is the first sign of pregnancy (If after forty days, the women does not have period, she would be pregnant). Intercourse of "Mashya and Mashyana" is seen as a symbol of instinctive tendency and as the result of that seven pairs of male and female children would be formed and when they have intercourse, seven different races would be created. In this myth, plant and earth together have prominent roles as well (13).

Ancient goddesses were very different from others, while still occasionally overlapping in functions and powers and even, at certain times and in some places, blending into one another. Modern scholars of religion and archaeology have also contributed to the dissemination of belief in the existence of a once universal mother goddess (14).

In India, the most popular ultimate symbol is penis or "Lingam" of the god, the creator, which should be inserted in to the vagina or "Yoni" of the goddess. Reflection on this symbol is contemplation about the moment the whole life is created. In India and most part of the world, the secret of intercourse is sacred and reproduction is a cosmic practice (15, 16).

"Armaiti" is also one of the ancient Persian goddesses and her name has the meaning of "Earth" and especially "Fertile earth" or "Earth's mother" and later it changed into the angel or "God of earth". Then the goddess became one of the

Amesha Spentas or the followers of Ahura Mazda (15, 16).

Also, the Mesopotamian goddess, Sarpanitum/ Erua who was the wife of Marduk, the great god had a common origin with Sepandārmaz because Erua is the goddess of birth and even the meaning of the word is "Fertility". All the three words of Armaiti, land and woman are the old Indo-European ones which have just slight differences in their appearance and spelling and they have spread in many Indo-European languages (15, 16).

In the legends of ancient China and Egypt, the birth of the first human being on earth has been narrated differently, but the common point of all the narrations is that the first humans emerged from the fusion of male and female elements. These male and female elements were plants in some legends, or they were water and soil in others (17). For example, in Scandinavian mythology, the symbol of creation and the foundation of the world is a tree; a symbol of penis in Freudian psychology which became popular in all the myths of the land as the symbol of mother of existence and the epitome of fertility and reproduction (18).

Western civilization was mainly formed in the valleys of large rivers- the Nile, the Tigris and Euphrates, Indus and later Ganges- the realm of the goddesses. But in the fourth century BC, during the invasion and occupation, Samis occupied the world of mother goddesses and gradually the myths were shifted towards male gender. The trend started from the death of old Tiamat- a large fish or a giant monster who ruled Babylon and the creator of universe- by Marduk, the young god of Babylon (10).

All the great mythologists agree that the language of the myths is not cryptic (7). Due to total dependence of the life of ancient people to nature, most of the symbols and myths are inextricably bound with natural elements and inspired by them. In the following, the most important symbols of fertility in the mythology, which were derived from nature, were reviewed.

**Earth and plants:** Woman and earth both impart the idea of generation. The nature of woman and earth is homogeneous and the idea of unity of woman and earth has existed for a long time. Woman and earth are the ancient Aryan words and with slight differences in the appearance and their structure, they were prevalent and wide-

spread in many Indo-European languages. The word "woman" is linked with life, and the word "man" is linked with death and dying. Our predecessors considered women as the source of life and liveliness due to their childbearing ability. It was the reason that in ancient times, generation of offspring was attributed to mothers (19).

The old belief considered earth fertile, reproductive and nurturing like women, and all creatures were safe in her nurturing arms. Woman is the director of life, birth giver and feeder of the offspring. In terms of power, woman is like the goddess of earth (10). The goddess had feminine gender and based on that the phrases "Motherland" or "Mother country" were created and became widespread. "Motherland" is a sustainable belief which existed in visual arts from old days till today's contemporary works of art. During the time, the word mother was not only referring to human mother (female), but the word was deemed as the origin of the creation of anything like the mother of nature, mother of universe, motherland and became common in human literature. Our predecessors perceived earth as the woman or mother and sky was representative of male gender or father in their belief. Therefore, the phrases "Earth mother" and "Sky father" derived from this origin (20).

The abovementioned idea is primarily associated with agriculture and farming communities. This issue is inevitably related to earth. Women give birth to children, just as the earth gives life to plants. Women feed the children and the earth does the same. Therefore, the magic of women is the magic of earth. In other words, they are joined together. The power that creates and feeds the creatures is truly a feminine force. In the agricultural world of ancient Mesopotamia, the Nile in Egypt and in cultural systems of farming, the goddess has a mythological representation (10).

In Europe, hundreds of goddesses' effigies belonging to Neolithic era were found and the goddess is the only celestial creature depicted at the time. When you have a goddess as the creator, then the universe is her body. She becomes one with the universe. The body of goddess Nut in Egyptian temple conveys the same message. In Indian religion- where the study of the semiotics of goddesses is still dominant- female is the symbol of Maya. Female is the symbol of what Kant called "Forms of Sensibility". Everything is inside her and deities are all her children (10).

In ancient times and matriarchal mythology,

woman was the origin of fertility and life, forgiveness and mercy. Ancient people connected the concept of female gender with the earth since women were the first farmers and seed collectors on earth and survival of the tribe depended on their activity. Therefore, besides their natural role, continuation of the human race was in the hand of females and people used to worship this gender as a goddess and constantly asked for her support. At that time, women had a superior social, political and economic position in comparison to men (21). Our predecessors considered women as the source of life and liveliness due to their childbearing ability. Therefore, in some ancient periods, the generation of offspring was attributed to mother. Even during the Elamite period, though there was no matriarchal system, the people used their mother or mothers' names instead of their fathers' names for introducing themselves (20).

Even the fact that the last month of winter is called "Sepandārmaz" or "Esfand" is related to the fertility and reproductively of the earth. In this month, the buds are green and the earth revives. Hence, Iranians selected this month, especially the fifth day of the month, for honoring the fertile earth and women (22). Through the study of mythology, we realize that women always had a fertility role. The statues remained from goddesses belonging to ancient times, all have indications of female reproductive organs. Even weeping of women in funerals is related to their fertility. In fact, as the water reaches the ground and fertilizes the seed in the soil, when we weep for the dead, they will find a new life; accordingly, women have important roles in mourning (8).

Sometimes seating or laying the child on the ground shows the dependence of the child to the earth and his belonging to the "Motherland". Child delivery on the ground is a common tradition in many nations. In China and some parts of Caucasus, when child labor pain starts, the woman sits on the ground and delivers her child. In Egyptian language, the phrase "sitting on the ground" denotes delivering the child (21).

Gender and intercourse were deemed as the celestial forces which fertilize the earth. In primal myths of the Neolithic era, harvesting the crops was the result of a sacred marriage. Soil was female and seed was the embryo formed by sky and rain, the sexual intercourse of sky and earth. Ritual sex relationships during crop cultivation were customary for men and women. Their intercourse which was considered sacred could revive the fer-



tilizing power of the soil; it resembled plowing of the farmer which was similar to the penis that goes into the womb of the earth and fertilizes that. The Bible indicates that ritual threesome sex in ancient Israel was performed until the sixth century BC though prophets Hosea and Ezekiel were angry about the act. In a temple in Jerusalem, in a house belonged to sacred prostitutes, particular customs were performed to celebrate Asherah, Canaan goddess of fertility (17).

However, in early days of Neolithic era, earth was not always considered feminine. In China and Japan, there was no specific gender for the universe. Later on, probably due to the maternal role of women, earth was deemed as a female entity and a nurturing one. In other parts of the world, no sex symbol was assigned for the earth but was regarded as a sacred entity. Earth generated everything in its womb just the same way as the women give birth to following generations. Some of the myths of creation in Europe and North America were based on the belief that the first human beings, like the plants grew from the earth; similar to seeds, their life started from the world underneath until new people came up to the surface like germination of the flowers and then they were collected by their human mothers. Once in a while people imagined climbing mountains to reach the sky, but now they touched something sacred on the earth. Some of the discovered labyrinths in Neolithic era are like the tunnels in Stone Age in Lascaux. However, the worshippers who travelled to the underground caves, instead of watching the sacred animals there, felt they have entered into the womb of Mother Earth and imagined they returned to the source of creation (22).

The same pattern can be found in Egyptian mythology. The slight difference was that Isis was not as capable as Anat. Osiris, the first king of Egypt, taught the knowledge of agriculture to people. His brother, Set, who wanted access to the throne, killed the king and his sister and his wife, Isis, wandered in the world to find the corpse of the king. When his body was found, he could only live for a short time and Isis became pregnant from the king. Horus, their son, was the only person that could sustain the dynasty. Then Osiris' body was torn apart and the pieces like seeds were buried in different locations throughout Egypt. He became the ruler of the underworld and responsible for harvesting the crops. Every year as a particular ritual, his death and tearing of his body parts is celebrated in harvesting and threshing

corn season. The god of the underworld is the god of harvesting as well and it indicates that life and death are inseparably intertwined together (23).

The abovementioned idea is also manifested in Greek myths about Demeter and her daughter Persephone. Demeter is the goddess of harvest who presided over grains and the fertility of the earth. When Hades, the king of the underworld, robs Persephone, Demeter left the Mount Olympus and mournfully wandered in the world. She was furious and impeded the harvesting of the crop. She threatened to kill the people through starvation unless her daughter, Kore, would be returned to her. By this warning, Zeus, messenger of the gods, sent Hermes to save Kore, but unfortunately when Kore was imprisoned in the underworld, she had to spend four months of the year with Hades who was now her husband. When Kore was returned to her mother, Demeter, she ended the fertility embargo and earth became fertile once again (22).

The Greeks and Romans regarded fertilizing of women like the cultivation. Indians considered the furrows in the land like female vulva and the semen as the seed (22). The words shovel and penis have the same root in Sanskrit (langala). The word "IAK" has both the meaning of penis and plough in several East Asian languages. Sometimes woman is symbolized to land's furrows and the penis to plough (23). In Islamic literature, woman is symbolized to farm and even holy Quran states that "Your wives are a tilth for you".

Women in the matriarchal era were responsible for the cultivation and the word has the same root with the word cultivation in Indo-European languages (23). Considering the grains as having female gender or ascribing agriculture to a goddess was the result of the role that women had in early agriculture (19).

Rural women in Finland irrigated the furrows of the farm with the drops of their breast milk before sowing the seeds. They believed that female fertility could influence the fertility of the cultivated land. It was well known that if a pregnant woman does the act of sowing, the product will be enhanced, but this woman must be chaste (24). In many regions, during drought, women run naked on the farm to stimulate the male sky until it rains. In Uganda, infertile women are a danger for gardens and fields and their husbands can ask for divorce only for this economic reason (24).

**Water:** In addition to plants and earth, waster is

an important symbol of fertility in ancient mythology. Water is the first element from which everything is created and is an old symbol for the fertility and womb of the women. In many ancient cultures, water is the source of creation and rain is the symbol for mothers, the conception force of the celestial god (24, 25).

The main differences between Iranian and Greek mythology are related to various narrations of creation myths. As stated before, in Iranian mythology, creation starts from the fusion of plant and earth. However, the Greeks believed in "first water" and they associated the water to a mother/goddess. In their opinion both water and mother/goddess had reproductive roles.

In ancient Iran, the role of this element gradually became more prominent; so Anahita, the goddess of the waters, was recognized as the symbol of fertility. In Iran, ArdivisuraNahita is the source and the goddess of all waters on earth. The words "Nahid" or "Anahid" are other variations of the name. Anahita was the purifier of male sperm, refiner of the female womb and the circulator of milk in the breasts of all mothers (15, 16). In many cities, Anahita was the beloved goddess of all people and in Armenia she is remembered with some titles like the "glory and life of Armenia", "revitalizing power", "mother of all knowledge" and "philanthropist". Anahita had many temples in Anatoli and based on Strabo, the Roman historian, the girls of aristocratic families were engaged with sacred prostitution before marriage. However, this tradition which was the result of combination of both Sami customs and worship of Nahid, was not popular in Zoroastrianism or the country of Iran (15, 16).

Zoroastrian religious texts strongly condemned and denounced prostitution and some people believed that this severe denunciation is indicative of the spread of the activity. The nuns of Anahita were famous for nobility and virtue. In Iran, Anahita was highly praised and considered as the source of life. In fact, ArdivisuraNahita was the goddess of water, rain, abundance, blessings, fertility, marriage, love, motherhood, birth and victory and was the symbol of a perfect woman in Iran. Aban is a special ceremony in honoring Anahita. It is held in November (10th day of Aban month) and people used to go to the beaches, rivers or springs for worshipping Anahita. In India, Zoroastrian girls and women still go to the beaches and rivers and celebrate the day (15, 16).

"Pinikri" was the great mother of the original

Elamites. Others identify her as "Kiririsha", another Elamite goddess. But we cannot simply take the two goddesses as one. Historical examples indicate that "Kiririsha" is an independent character. For example, "Untash-Napirisha" who established "Ziggurat of Chogha Zanbil" around 521 BC. erected a temple for "Pinikir" and established another separate temple for Kiririsha (15, 16). In mythologies about the new year of Iran and India, by killing the dragons as the rulers of the world, imprisoned women would be freed and the closed waters are released (17). Moreover, there is the myth that when the young girl lets the rain fall over her body, her virginity is lost. Even today, in rural areas and deserts of Iran, women bring water from the springs not men, since springs belong to women. Each spring has a goddess and water is considered feminine. If men go to the spring, it is like raping a woman (17).

In Iran, about hundred years ago, there was a custom that if the amount of waters in the aqueducts decreased, they would assign several women to immerse their bodies in the aqueducts annually. In some parts of Iran, these aqueducts were considered feminine and people had to find husbands for them. In both cases, the relationship between men and women was evident and documented. Let us not forget that water and women are connected together in another way; both of them should be clean and their perceived value is related to their purity. In Iran, springs, rivers and seas are still considered very sacred and respectable. Even the people living near them sacrifice their belongings for the increase in supply of water (17).

**Moon:** Aside from the above symbols, in ancient mythology, the moon was also commonly known as the epitome of female power and also mother goddess. The mother goddess and other associated goddesses were always deemed as related to the moon. Moon was also associated with fertility and the growth of plants and trees. Phases of the moon in the sky, from the crescent to full moon, were also the symbols of birth and death. In fact, moon was the donor of the rain and reflects the concept of fertility. The ancient belief was that the fertility in animals, like the fertility in plants is dependent to the moon (25).

All Greek goddesses were once the goddess of moon. In ancient Rome, "Diana" was the goddess of moon and was a beautiful girl. Also, people in ancient times associated the phases of the moon

with women's menstrual cycle. They thought that through the movements of the moon, the menstrual cycles used to occur. According to Chinese folk tales, when the blossom of the moon falls on the ground, any woman who swallows the blossom will become pregnant (22).

According to the ancients, moon's positions can have an effect on the sea and its ebb and flow is the result of moon's gravity. Moreover, rainfall is also associated with moon. Therefore, since moon influences the amount of rainfall and consequently the fertility of the earth, land's fertility was associated with the moon's position. In mythology, it is stated that the rain falls from the womb of the moon, *i.e.* moon's treasure. From ancient times, people have found from experience that with changes of the moon raining starts and hence they perceive both as the symbol of fertility and reproduction (22).

**Animals:** In addition to the above elements, namely earth, water and moon, some animals have been seen as the symbol of fertility or reproductive tool in mythology. Likewise, snake is associated with pregnancy and is considered as the husband of women. In ancient fertility rituals, snake had a pivotal role. It is partly due to the similarity of the body of snake to the penis. For example, Pazuzu was a demon Babylonian– Assyrian god in the first millennium BC who had a serpentine penis (24). Similarly, sanctity of a woman and the serpent in ancient Elam, was deemed as a common custom from the period of matriarchy (19). Heaven's snake was always reincarnated in a woman's face. Some people believed that the moon with the visage of a snake was sleeping with their girls or wives. In the East, all believed that the first sexual intercourse of girls, during puberty or during menstruation, had taken place with the snake. In India, it was assumed that snakes prevented infertility causing women to give birth to many children. Also, it is shown in the legends that mother of Caesar became pregnant by a serpent in the temple of Apollo (19).

Cow was also the symbol of fertility and female reproduction in ancient times. In comparative mythology of India and Iran, fertility represented by the dairy cows as the symbol of rain clouds in India, was manifested by women in Iran. This is the reason that in most villages in Iran, women drew milk from the cow's udder and doing the act by men was considered indecent and obscene. In Persian mythology, cow was the symbol of moon.

When the cow was killed by the hands of evil, its sperm would travel to the moon. Crescent moon was the symbol of cow's horn and from this perspective, both were the symbol of fertility and reproduction. For this reason, the horns of the bovidae family as the gods of fertility were representative of great mother as well (15, 16).

### Conclusion

Myth is a sacred and divine story that features the work of gods and supernaturals, or the ancestors who created the culture from the beginning, the timeless time. A quick overview of selected samples of mythology in ancient civilizations denotes the multiplicity and variety in symbols of fertility and reproduction. Most ancient civilizations believed in goddesses and as clarified, in most of them, the power of creation and governing belonged to goddesses; therefore, also in people's beliefs, reproduction, creation of the universe and similar species, were attributed to women. It partly explains that why the women are still considered the prime suspect of infertility in some communities. Besides goddesses, nature had a pivotal role in fertility myths of most civilizations. The perceived similarity in earth and woman/mother, the influence of the moon on fertility of women and the role of such animals like snake and cow in reproduction myths, all refer to the fact that nature was the context for human imagination and the origin for illustrations and dreaming about his requirements and questions.

The myths reflect the deep durable roots in necessity and importance of fertility and reproduction in different cultures worldwide. According to its status and cultural history of fertility, it can be understood that why in modern industrial societies, fertility and reproduction are still important issues and their social aspects extend beyond the family and involve the whole society.

### Conflict of Interest

Authors declare no conflict of interest.

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