

# AFRICAN DARK MOTHER - OLDEST DIVINITY WE KNOW

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From *dark mother: african origins and godmothers*, originally published by Authors Choice Press, 2001. © 2001 by the author.

**D**r. Birnbaum is on the core faculty of the Women's Spirituality program at the California Institute of Integral Studies in San Francisco. She is a Sicilian/Italian woman and feminist cultural historian with a focus on the vernacular history of women and other subaltern classes. In this excerpt, she links the oldest deity of human culture, the dark mother of Africa, with Isis and the Black Madonnas of Europe and elsewhere. In accord with the latest findings of anthropology, she emphasizes the African origins of all humans and the legacy found on African migration paths—namely, the values of sharing and caring, justice with compassion, equality, and transformation—which were transmitted to all continents from 60,000 BCE to the present, as part of the primordial tradition. [Editor's Note: Dr. Birnbaum deliberately writes in a style using very few capitals, emphasizing essential equality.]

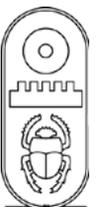
An image of the bird-headed african snake goddess in the orant position (arms upraised in celebration) dated 4,000 BCE, has been called an image of our creatrix. Angeleen Campra's doctoral study of Sophia has taught me that *generatrix* is the more appropriate term. The image is held in the Department of Egyptian Antiquities of the British Museum. Preceding this anthropomorphic image were her signs—the color ochre red and the pubic V. Her characteristics are those of a bird and a snake, yet she is a woman. With legs firmly planted in the earth, her arms celebrate the universe, and her breasts offer nurturance to all life. Why hasn't she been acknowledged?



Black-topped pottery, fired upside down with the top buried in sand. Naqada II culture (3500–3200 BCE). This deprived the clay of oxygen and resulted in the distinctive coloration. Excavated from a grave at Badari, probably used to hold grain. An image of a hunting dog attacking an ibex was scratched onto the vessel in ancient times. From the Collection of the Rosicrucian Egyptian Museum.

Slave traders, slaveholders, and imperialists (european, arab, and north american) enslaved Africa's peoples. African resources were stolen, african treasures sacked, icons and other art objects were looted and taken away. African traditions were appropriated, destroyed, distorted, or suppressed. What remains in Africa today is what could not be stolen: the memory of the dark mother in rock engravings, cave paintings, other art, and rituals.

Along with her early signs connoting generation of all life, african prehistoric art associates the dark mother with the





Detail from a Neolithic carving from the Tassili (Algeria). Photo ©2006 Gruban / Wikimedia Commons.

earth's fruitfulness; she is depicted with corn showering down between cow's horns. Women are often depicted dancing. Men are painted running with antelopes, elephants, rhinoceroses, lions, and giraffes. In regions of the Hoggar, Tadrart Acacus, and above all in the Tassili, "we have some twelve thousand paintings done between the fifth and first millennia, which includes the most beautiful renderings of the human form that prehistory can show."<sup>1</sup>

In the neolithic era, a black-topped red polished ware appeared in Nubia and elsewhere. "These vessels (nearly all open bowls) have a dark red exterior and a shiny black interior, the black extending also to the outside for half inch to an inch below the rim. The red was achieved by painting the surface with red ochre before firing, while the black seems to have been imparted by placing the vessel, directly after firing, rim downward, in a mass of densely smoking material such as leaves or straws."<sup>2</sup> This technique, characteristic of the pottery of northeastern Africa, was subsequently known as far away as India.<sup>3</sup>

During the millennium before Jesus, continuing into the first five hundred years thereafter, the major divinity of the mediterranean world appears to have been Isis of Africa, dark mother of many names. Great mother of the mediterranean, Isis inherited a long matristic tradition of Africa whose

signs were the color red ochre and the pubic V, as well as spirals and circles, and human identification with animals. Scholarship since the 1960s has recovered what the ancients knew: Isis was an african deity, whose origins were in Nubia, or upper Egypt. Nubia, at the confluence of the Blue and White Niles, was an african region whose civilization flourished for "more than five hundred years before the building of the great pyramids of Egypt."<sup>4</sup>

In her sanctuary at Philae in Africa, Isis was black. Metaphor of the dark mother of humanity and precursor of black, as well as church-whitened, madonnas of christian Europe,<sup>5</sup> her civilization at Meroe, Nubia, from 100 BCE to 400 CE conveys her values. Region of inner Africa best known to the ancients, it was called Ethiopia, a name given in antiquity to "all parts of Africa occupied by dark-skinned peoples." Egyptian artists utilized a "red-brown paint for the skin color of Egyptian men, yellow for Egyptian women, and a dark brown or black for all Nubians." Greeks and romans called Ethiopia (the area south of Egypt) the "Land of the Burnt Faces," and called the Sudan "Land of the Blacks."<sup>6</sup> Ethiopia today comprises Nubia.<sup>7</sup> Although nubians resemble other peoples of the Sudan, they are unique in speaking an ancient group of languages unrelated to the arabic of their neighbors.<sup>8</sup> Egypt built some of its massive

monuments in Nubia, notably the great rock temples of Abu Simbel, but Nubia gave the dark mother Isis to Egypt, and the rest of the world.<sup>9</sup>

The little island of Philae in Nubia was known as “Holy Island,” as well as “Interior of Heaven,” and “City of Isis.”<sup>10</sup> In the 1960s, William Y. Adams, leading nubologist, anthropologist, archaeologist, and UNESCO expert, supervised the salvaging of Nile artifacts and treasures during the construction of the Aswan dam. Adams considers veneration of Isis to be “one of history’s most important ideological transformations.” Within the microcosm of Nile lands, worship of Isis became “the first truly international and supra-national religion, no longer claimed as the proprietary cult of any one ruler but sanctioned by and conferring its blessings upon several. Philae became a holy city and place of pilgrimage alike for all classes and all nationalities: Meroites, Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, and desert nomads.”<sup>11</sup> Worship “of the age-old fertility goddess of Egypt,” for Adams, anticipated the role of “Christianity and Islam on the larger stage of the Middle Ages.”<sup>12</sup>

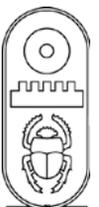
The city of Meroe, site of the kushite royal court, was the center of an empire “that included not only much of Nubia, but also regions far south of modern-day Khartoum. Meroitic culture was strongly connected with central African traditions although it made use of Egyptian styles, to which it added graeco-roman elements.”<sup>13</sup> Study of nubian archeology and history has established the centrality of the dark mother Isis, who is considered to have exemplified african matrilineal traditions. “It was only through the royal women that Nubian rulers inherited the throne. All kings and queens had to be born to a queen, usually the ruler’s sister.”<sup>14</sup> The seamless fit between religion and daily life in Africa is suggested by the fact that an african woman, as priestess of the dark mother, was “Mistress of Heaven,” as well as “Mistress of the House.”<sup>15</sup>



Saite Coffin of Tahure (Twenty-sixth Dynasty). The eyes look toward the East, and the rising sun. From the collection of the Rosicrucian Egyptian Museum.

Eyes of Isis inside tombs of egyptian pharaohs looked to eternity; e.g., that of Khnumnakht (100-100 BCE), whose sarcophagus is now in New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art. Her eyes can be seen on the many amulets worn to this day by mediterranean peoples to ward off the “evil eye.” The ubiquity of the belief in the “evil eye” may convey the wide-spread popular appeal of the dark mother, as well as patriarchal anxiety before the mother’s riveting gaze.<sup>16</sup>

Veneration of Isis, according to R. E. Witt, spread from her center in Nubia to Afghanistan, the Black Sea, and Portugal, to northern England.<sup>17</sup> By the first century of the common era, one of her largest temples outside Africa was located in Rome, while others were located at Ostia and Pompeii. At Philae in Nubia, Isis is invoked: “Hail Queen, mother of god.” At Ostia, outside Rome, Italy, she was celebrated on the 5th of March, when sailors returned to the sea, naming their boats and ships for her. Women of Rome, after immersing themselves in the icy Tiber, proceeded on their knees all along the river



edge to the Pantheon, today a gathering place for feminists.

The image of Isis most popular at the height of the roman empire appears to have been that of Isis nursing her child, Horus. Besides queen of the sea, Isis was considered queen of heaven and of earth, and was easily transmuted into the christian holy mother. Legions of the roman empire, whose ranks were drawn from subordinated dark peoples of three continents, carried images of african Isis, as well as images of Isis melded together with west asian divinities Cybele, manna, and Astarte all over the known world, from Africa to Asia, to Rome, France, England, to the Danube.<sup>18</sup> At Benevento, where a great iseo flourished in the roman epoch, her followers were later called witches.<sup>19</sup>

In October 1999, when Wally [ed: the author's husband] and I visited the sanctuary of Isis at Philae, I remembered Lucius Apuleius' description. Roman citizen of Athens who studied at Carthage and lived in the interior of Morocco, Lucius said he was awakened by "all the perfumes of Arabia," when Isis appeared and said, "I am Nature, the universal Mother, mistress of all the elements, primordial child of time, sovereign of all things spiritual, queen of the dead, queen also of the immortals, the single manifestation of all gods and goddesses that are."

Worshipped by many names throughout Africa, Asia, and greek and roman empires, she was known as Isis, Hathor, Ma'at, Artemis, Demeter-Persephone, Hera, Mother of Corn, Juno, and Hecate. She was Lilith of west Asia and Kali of India. Hymns invoked her as "the one who rises and dispels darkness," solar ruler who "smites her enemy," whose radiance "fills the earth with gold-dust."<sup>20</sup>

The memory of the ancient african mother is recalled today in the poetry of Luisah Teish, african american poet and writer who traces her heritage to Egypt, which she calls the "mystical cradle of civilization" and finds Isis in yoruba goddess Yemonja, mother goddess who "nurtures us through the cycles of Life." She also finds Isis in yoruba's Oshun, goddess of love, art, and sensuality who "represents the Erotic in Nature." Africa, for Teish, is a continent where "deities walk among human beings and dance is worship." Acknowledging african diasporas, Teish finds reverence for the earth in african ibo beliefs and in native american "need to walk in balance." Teish's poems praise yoruba Yemonja as "mother of the night, the great dark depth, the bringer of light" who is related to Isis and Hathor. She considers the implications of the many manifestations of the dark mother: "The Horned Cow, the many-teated Sow, the queen bee, the Mothertree, the Pregnant



David Roberts (1796–1864),  
*View of the Island of Philae, Nubia, 1838.*

Womb, the Grain-seed broom, the candle's wick, the matrix, and woman, you are my daughter."<sup>21</sup>

The civilization of the dark mother of Africa is glimpsed at Meroe in Nubia, region of upper Egypt in the area called Ethiopia. Egypt, despite eurocentric misconceptions aligning the country with the "Orient" or the "Near East,"<sup>22</sup> is an african country shaped by the Nile, river that carries african peoples and products back and forth along a north-south axis, particularly between Egypt and Nubia. In the ancient civilization of nubian Meroe, matrilineal succession was the custom, yet genders co-existed peacefully. Some queen mothers ruled alone, many ruled with husbands or sons. In mother-centered cultures of Africa, religions also co-existed peaceably. At Meroe, the religion of Isis honored the religion of the lion-headed god called Apedemek as well as that of Amun. Priests and priestesses of each religion shared in the political and economic administration of Meroe.

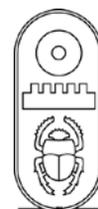
An egalitarian civilization that nurtured all life, Meroe was a noted center of learning and commerce that spread its prosperity to all peoples. Every day, in the temple called Table of the Sun dedicated to goddesses and gods, africans offered food and other life-sustaining goods. "Those in need could come at any time and take freely of the offerings."<sup>23</sup> This ancient african tradition, persisting over

millennia, is recalled today in San Francisco in the vibrant community services of Rev. Cecil Williams of Glide Memorial Church.

The Table of the Sun at Meroe was the precursor of roman temples to Cerere (Ceres), grain goddess of Rome, where the poor would come for free wheat. This ultimately african celebration of wheat is kept to this day in Italy in mid-August at the christian festival of the assumption of the virgin into heaven. On August 15, when we were in Sicily, we went to her festival at Gangi, in the mountains of northwest Sicily when many hundreds of emigrant workers come with their family on this date every year. We brought home a triple cluster of wheat from this festival, that celebrates pagan wheat goddesses, and put it on the front door of our Berkeley home.

In Rome, the temple of wheat goddess Ceres became the church of Santa Maria di Cosmedin, a church with a black madonna. In the early historic epoch, a sculpture that connotes roman male appropriation of Isis was placed at the entrance to this church. The legend of this sculpture (called Bocca della verità, or Mouth of truth) has it that the mouth of truth will bite the hand of anyone who tells a lie. Contemporary italian feminists, enacting the dark mother's legacy of truth and justice, have placed replicas of the Bocca della verità in theaters where people can deposit written denunciations of corrupt mafia chiefs and political officials.

The interior of Santa Maria di Cosmedin (Rome), prepared for the Byzantine Divine Liturgy. The ancient temple dating from the sixth century, was originally part of the Greek community of Rome, and is shared today by the Roman Catholic Church and the Greek-Melkite Catholic Church. The Greek-Byzantine Churches inherited much from the Mystery Schools and the Egyptian-Hermetic Tradition, and continue the Isis-like veneration of Mary. The title "Cosmedin" comes from the Greek Kosmos, meaning both "the Cosmos," and "beautiful adornment." Photo © 2007 by Till Niermann/Wikimedia Commons.

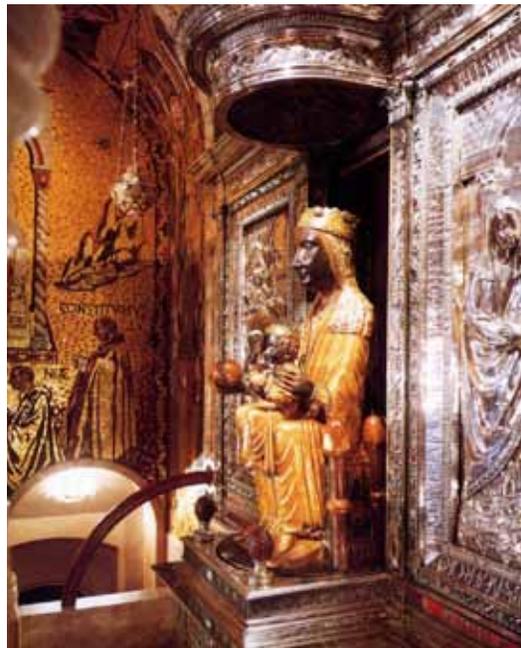


Italian evidence of veneration of the african dark mother may be found in icons of Isis in the national museum at Naples, and icons at Pompeii, Benevento, Palestrina, Aquileia, Verona, and in Rome. Much of the evidence of the widespread veneration of african Isis in the roman epoch was destroyed by the volcanic eruption that laid waste to Pompeii.<sup>24</sup> In 1997 the Isis exhibit at Milan documented the vast arc of veneration of Isis in late antiquity and early christianity, an arc that extended from Africa to Europe, to the Ukraine, to India.

After christianity was established in 323 CE, church fathers, aiming to obliterate pagan beliefs, destroyed Meroe in 450 CE. What was it they found so threatening in this african civilization that identified so strongly with nature, particularly the Nile? “Every year the land arose from the watery flood richer and more full of life; every year the migratory birds swooped down into the marshes for food and rest. A great order, ancient and ever renewing, sustained Egypt while nations rose and fell all around it.... Nature worked patiently, bore richly, and sustained continually. The human order which grew out of that great original natural magic was as unique as its setting.”<sup>25</sup>

This grounding in a constant and sustaining earth may help us understand why egyptians attained an extraordinary level of artistic, architectural, and moral excellence. “The ‘gods’ and ‘goddesses’ of Egypt literally sprang from the soil and the water of the river, and literally were one with the air and the creatures which flew through it, all interweaving into the phenomenon of the country itself.” Everything, and every creature, was imbued with the force of life: “The hieroglyphic word for beetle means ‘to be.’ The beetle and sun are both analogs of the same force, not symbols.” For the earth-bonded person, in Africa, Sicily, and elsewhere, “The name of the thing and the thing itself are the same.”<sup>26</sup>

Earth-bonded theology is not ponderous. In one egyptian creation story, the creator Amun runs around honking after laying an egg. Africans, who regard their deities familiarly, call Amun the “Great Cackler.” Similarly, africans attributed animal characteristics to humans, and human characteristics to animals, identifying divinity with animal and human forms.<sup>27</sup> Sometimes the goddess was a cow named Hathor, other times she was a woman with a Hathor headdress. Horus, son of Isis, could be a hawk, sometimes a man with a hawk’s head, or a child in the arms of his mother.<sup>28</sup> Harmony between humans and animals characterized ancient Africa, as did harmony between men and women, a contentment visible in many depictions of embracing couples. Seeing life as a spiral, africans believed new life came from death.



The Black Madonna at Santa Maria de Montserrat Benedictine Monastery in the Montserrat Mountains in Catalonia. In the fifteenth century, the Basque soldier Iñigo de Loyola hung up his military equipment before this image and began the pursuit of mysticism, founding a religious order which followed a policy of practical mysticism (“Contemplatives in Action”), deeply devoted to Mary. The evening hymn sung each night before this Black Madonna begins, “Rose of April, Dark Lady of the Mountain Chain...”

Isis melded with Ma'at, african goddess whose name connotes mother,<sup>29</sup> and with Sekhmet, whose name means “powerful one.” Ma'at had a feather on her head that signified justice. Many representations of Isis (as well as of Ma'at) have feathers. Feathers, an egyptian guide advised us, connote equality, since they are the same, back and front. When a person died, his or her heart, the seat of intelligence, would be weighed on a scale balanced by the feather of Ma'at. If the heart was not as light as the feather, the soul would be lost to Apet, the devourer.

Ma'at, or mother, embodied truth, ethics, justice, and righteous behavior.<sup>30</sup> Sekhmet, the fierce aspect of the african dark mother, was a woman with a lion's head. Hundreds of statues of Sekhmet were found in the temple of Mut in Karnak. Like Isis, Sekhmet originally carried a sun disk on her head and an ankh, signifying



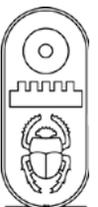
Goddess on a coffin fragment, Twenty-second Dynasty (1064-717 BCE). Many aspects of different Goddesses are combined in this protective image: the headdress of Isis, the face of Sekhmet, the color of Wadjet, and the wings of Mut. From the collection of the Rosicrucian Egyptian Museum.

life, in her hand. The ankh is said to prefigure the christian cross, although the christian symbol has no female oval.<sup>31</sup>

African Isis melded with anatolian Cybele, sumerian Inanna, canaanite Astarte, and roman Diana. Isis' distinguishing images were a throne, a boat, sails, and the annual flooding of the Nile. Often depicted with outstretched wings, Isis harks back to the paleolithic bird and snake goddess of Africa. Attesting to african migrations' carrying african beliefs to all continents, a contemporary native american figurine is that of a venerated woman with wings. A 20th century sicilian artist depicted comari, women who bonded together in memory of the mother, sheltered by protective wings of Isis.

In antiquity, at Byblos in west Asia, african Isis was identified with the canaanite goddess Astarte. With hellenization, Isis became the great mother; her consort Osiris, or “the great black,” became Zeus, Pluto, and Dionysus. The enduring truth of Isis, whose civilization centered in nubian Meroe, may be that she embodied veneration of all life...trees are sacred, so are birds, crocodiles, the dung beetle, the hooded cobra, and all living creatures.

R.E. Witt, historian, following the transformation of a “purely African faith into a world religion,” points out that african veneration of Isis became greek, then graeco-roman<sup>32</sup> as greek and roman empires swept through Africa, Europe, and Asia. After 332 BCE, when Alexander of Macedonia conquered Egypt, Alexandria in Africa became the capitol of an empire that stretched from the Nile to the Danube, a city where africans, asians, europeans, jews, and greeks mingled, where Osiris became Aesculapius, or Serapis, healing god of Greece and Rome, and Isis, blending with anatolian Cybele, canaanite Astarte, and graeco-roman goddesses, became great mother of the Mediterranean.<sup>33</sup>



All over the known world in the first centuries of the common era, slaves and noble women venerated african Isis as a divinity who “prevailed through the force of love, pity, compassion, and her personal concern for sorrows.”<sup>34</sup> Before christianity did so, the religion of Isis promised life after death. Isis centers have been found throughout the roman empire; in Gaul, Portugal, Spain, Britain, Germany, and Italy, particularly in places that later became sanctuaries of black madonnas.<sup>35</sup>

In Italy, Isis was a mother divinity associated with healing; the 6th century BCE temple to Isis at Pompeii is located next to a temple of Aesculapius, or Serapis.<sup>36</sup> A significant characteristic of Isis, one later associated with the christian madonna, was that she was a compassionate mother. In the christian epoch her son Horus was represented as a christ figure. Isis is often depicted with a laurel wreath and two prominent ears, symbolizing that she listened with both ears to the prayers of all those who came to her, an image that can be found to this day in italian folklore.

Water, always associated with Isis, held a sacred quality: holy water, holy rivers, and holy sea. The serpent, identified with Isis; was always sacred. Hathor, was associated with regeneration. The cow, another image of Isis, became sacred in India. Music, associated with Isis, was conveyed by the image of Isis carrying a sistrum, a rattle still heard in african music today. Isis and wheat, in the roman epoch, became Ceres and wheat. In the christian epoch Isis became santa Lucia, whose images always carry a sheaf of wheat. The olive tree, associated with Isis, has today become symbol of nonviolent transformation. Italy’s contemporary nonviolent left political coalition is named: L’Ulivo, or the olive tree.<sup>37</sup>

Mistress of religion in Egypt, Isis was god the mother, yet in Isis there was no division between feminine and masculine. She was beloved by women and men, young and old,



Isis giving milk, the favorite image of the Goddess for the Roman world. Collection of the Louvre. Photo © 2007, Rama/Wikimedia Commons.

and all social classes. Her statue at Philae, created between the second and first centuries before Jesus, carries the sistrum in one hand and the ankh in the other. In her 600 BCE image in the Museum of Cairo, Isis is figured as a black nursing mother, who bears a startling resemblance to christian images of the nursing madonna.

Veneration of Isis, her spouse Osiris, and son Horus persisted in all the pharaonic dynasties, a 3,000 year old history when belief in Isis spread from Meroe and Alexandria to “the whole Mediterranean basin.”<sup>38</sup> In Italy and other latin countries where the holy family is a focus of devotion, the trinity of Isis and her husband and child became the popular christian trinity of Maria, Joseph, and Jesus, popular trinity that differs from the motherless trinity—father, son, and holy ghost—of canonical christianity.

At african Memphis, hymns praised Isis as a civilizing, universal divinity who had ended cannibalism, instituted good laws, and given birth to agriculture, arts and letters, moral principle, good customs, and justice. Mistress of medicine, healer of human maladies, sovereign of earth and seas, protectress from navigational perils and war, Isis was “Dea della salvezza per eccellenza...veglia anche sulla morte,” divinity of salvation par excellence, who also watches over the dead.<sup>39</sup>



Amulet bearing the name of Vizier Paser, with Isis and Hathor; gold, gold leaf and amazonite, New Kingdom. Excavated from the Serapeum of Memphis. Collection of the Louvre. Photo by Marie-Lan Nguyen/Wikimedia Commons.

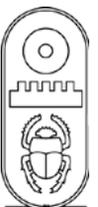
The signal relevance of the dark mother Isis to our own time may be that she signifies nonviolent transformation. The cosmology and psychology of this value of nonviolence may be realized if we understand that in Isis, who gave “light to the sun,” there was no division of female from male, and no separation of one female from another. Her sister Ma’at, with whom she melded, was goddess of truth. Isis and Ma’at epitomized order in nature, a principle carried forward by Pythagoras and his followers in the greek period, and by scientists thereafter. In the african civilization of Isis, human beings and social justice were joined.

Each human was judged at death by Ma’at’s feather of justice, and by the negative confession: “I have not committed iniquity....I have not oppressed the poor.... I have not

defaulted.... I have not caused the slave to be ill-treated.... I have not murdered.... I have not made any to weep.... I have not falsified the beam of the balance.”<sup>40</sup> Values of the isiac negative confession suggest why, in the 20th century, Simone Weil held that hebrew scriptures were indebted to egyptian sacred writings.<sup>41</sup>

Isis was appropriated by Greece and Rome in cults of Hera, Demeter, Fortuna, Ceres, and Juno, and by christianity in cults of saints—notably Lucia.<sup>42</sup> Roman emperors and christian fathers destroyed her temples, but the legacy of the african dark mother, despite attempted obliteration and suppression, has persisted in art. The memory may be glimpsed in Picasso’s *Les Femmes d’Alger*, african in appearance, who bear a startling resemblance to Isis and to the many black madonnas in this region of France.<sup>43</sup>

For Jean Leclant, egyptologist at the Academy of France, “Isis, mother of Horus, triumphant, but at the same time broken-hearted, prefigures the Madonna col Bambino of the christian religion.”<sup>44</sup> Black madonnas of Europe, and other dark female divinities of the world, may be the most tangible evidence we have of the deep and persistent memory of the african dark mother. Her continuing legacy is marked by passionate identification with the oppressed and with values of justice with compassion, equality, and transformation. In the christian epoch, Isis’ temple at Pompeii was succeeded by many sanctuaries of black madonnas. At Pomigliano dell’Arco, rituals venerating the black madonna are fervent. At Montevergine, suggesting how her icons carry the history of the subaltern, the black madonna is called black slave mother. At Foggia, where peasant communists would come in pilgrimage to her, the black image is called l’Immacolata.<sup>45</sup> Black madonnas may be found throughout Italy, as documented in my book, *Black Madonnas*, and throughout the world....



In Sicily, on first migration paths from Africa, the memory of Isis is everywhere. Dozens of icons of Isis along with Bastet, her cat familiar, may be seen in sicilian museums. At carnival time, throughout the christian epoch to the present, figures of Isis and her cat express the laughter of subaltern peoples at church and state.

In Africa in the fifth century of the common era, nubians and their neighbors took up arms to prevent forced dedication to christianity of temples of Isis at Philae. Yet by the middle of the sixth century, byzantine emperors had imposed a patriarchal version of christianity as state religion on Nubia. When, less than a century later, islamic invaders took Egypt, nubians resisted but finally negotiated a treaty in which they kept christianity and political sovereignty. In the 15th century when Nubia fell to arab nomads, islam became the state religion. Yet, in Africa, underneath patriarchal religions of christianity and islam, the memory persists to this day of the ancient dark mother.<sup>46</sup>

Glimpsed in daily and festival rituals, the memory may be closer to bodily resonance than to cognitive remembrance. The memory has persisted in Africa in contemporary rituals, as well as in rituals in all lands reached by african migrants, which is to say all continents of the world. Victor Turner, in fieldwork among the ndembu, a mother-centered culture of northwest Zambia, describes a

girls' puberty ritual when a young woman is separated from her mother and her childhood dies. The ritual is enacted under a milk tree that exudes milky white latex. Echoes of this ritual of the separation of mother and daughter may be found in many of the world's myths, notably the myth of Demetra and Proserpina. For the ndembu, the milk tree is said to be, not symbolize, milk, lactation, breasts, and nubility. It is also the place "where the ancestress slept," where the novice's grandmother, mother, and all ndembu women, were initiated into womanhood, and where the tribe began. For the ndembu, the milk tree is the principle of matrilineage, mother-centeredness, and is the whole ndembu nation.

The memory of the dark mother also persists in contemporary african popular beliefs. For the yoruba of Africa, the spiral, sign of the mother, determines life. Everything is constantly moving in a spiraling motion. "The whole life span of a man or a woman is a journey. That is our belief...All movements are journeys. We are progressing, we are moving."<sup>47</sup> In this movement, yoruba women have a strong sense of their own power, enabling them to accommodate to male insecurities. For example, two wives wrap the hair of a transvestite priest of Agemo in female style.<sup>48</sup> Yoruba women are economically independent, and become dramatically so when they reach menopause,



Black Madonna and Child of Tindari, Sicily, eleventh-twelfth centuries. The inscription is from the Song of Songs 1:5 in the Hebrew Scriptures: "I am black and beautiful..." Photo © 2006 Clemensfranz/Wikimedia Commons.



Fausto and Felice Niccolini, painting of the Temple of Isis in Pompeii. Published in *Le case e i monumenti di Pompei* (1854-1896).

or when they become grandmothers, at which time they declare independence from domestic work.

The civilization of Isis has bequeathed to contemporary africans, and to other earth-bonded peoples, a “high degree of tolerance towards the gods and the religious practices of those they encountered.” It has been common practice in Africa simply to incorporate the gods of others into their own pantheon “with an all-inclusiveness that saw all deities as one more manifestation of the same overarching principle.”<sup>49</sup>

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Burchard Brentjes, *African Rock Art*, Anthony Dent, trans., (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., 1965), 71.

<sup>2</sup> William Y. Adams, “Ceramics,” in *Africa in Antiquity: The Arts of Ancient Nubia and the Sudan* (New York: The Brooklyn Museum, 1978), 127. The priority of africans in making tools was underlined in the recent discovery of a 2.3 million year old “tool factory” in Kenya. See “Ancient tool ‘factory’ linked to pre-humans,” *The Vancouver Sun*, May 6, 1999.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> See Adams, *Africa in Antiquity*, “Foreword,” by Michael Botwinick. See Jocelyn Gohary, *Guide to the Nubian Monuments on Lake Nasser* (The American University in Cairo Press, 1998). See page 14 for Meroe, where women held high status. On our 1999 visit to Nubia in Upper Egypt, we noted that in the small temple to the queen at Abu Simbel, she is of equal stature with the king. She wears the Hathor head dress of cow horns surmounted by a sun disk with the two plumes (connoting equality), and holds the sistrum against her breast.

<sup>5</sup> See Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum, *Black Madonnas: Feminism, Religion, and Politics in Italy* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1993).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* 13.

<sup>7</sup> Adams, *Africa in Antiquity*, “Geography and Population of the Nile Valley,” 17.

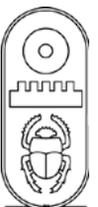
<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>9</sup> See “Goddesses,” in *Mistress of the House, Mistress of Heaven: Women in Ancient Egypt*, Anne K. Capel and Glenn E. Markoe, eds., (New York: Hudson Hills Press in association with Cincinnati Art Museum, 1996), 121ff.

<sup>10</sup> See John H. Taylor, *Egypt and Nubia* (London, The British Museum Press, 1991).

<sup>11</sup> William Y. Adams, *Nubia: Corridor to Africa* (London: Allen Lane, 1977), 338.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*



<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>15</sup> Capel, *Mistress of the House*, 9

<sup>16</sup> See Lawrence DiStasi, *Mal Occhio (evil eye), the Underside of Vision* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1981).

<sup>17</sup> R.E. Witt, *Isis in the Ancient World, Aspects of Greek and Roman Life* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1971; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997). For the higher respect given to women in ancient Egypt than to women in the high culture of Greece, see Gay Robins, *Women in Ancient Egypt* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

<sup>18</sup> Stephen Quirke and Jeffrey Spencer, eds., *The British Museum Book of Ancient Egypt* (London, British Museum Press, 1992). 196.

<sup>19</sup> "Guardate bene Iside sembra una Madonna," *La Curiosità, la Repubblica*, 29 agosto 2000.

<sup>20</sup> Lucius Apuleius, *The Golden Ass: The Transformations of Lucius...A New Translation by Robert Graves from Apuleius* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1951), 264-266.

<sup>21</sup> See Luisah Teish, "Introduction," in *Carnival of the Spirit: Season Celebrations and Rites of Passage* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1994), 22. See also, Margaret Thompson Drewal, *Yoruba Ritual: Performers, Play, Agency* (Bloomington: IN, Indiana University Press, 1992), 22.

<sup>22</sup> See Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

<sup>23</sup> D. Jean Collins, "The Message of Meroe," *Gnosis* (magazine), Spring 1990, no. 15.

<sup>24</sup> Stefania Adamo Muscettola, "La decorazione architettonica e l'arredo," Soprintendenza Archeologica per le Province di Napoli e Caserta, *Alla ricerca di Iside. Analisi, studi e restauri dell'Iseo pompeiano nel Museo di Napoli* (Napoli, Italia: Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli, 1992).

<sup>25</sup> Michael Crisp, "The Spirit of Egypt," *Gnosis* (magazine), Spring 1990, no. 15.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> See Sylvia Schoske, ed., "Votive Figurines," in *Egyptian Art in Munich* (München: Staatliche Sammlung Ägyptischer Kunst München, 1993), 4.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., "Figure of the goddess Mut," 52.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., "Standing statue of Sekhmet," 38.

<sup>32</sup> Witt, *Isis*. See also, Muscettola, *Alla ricerca di Iside, Analisi, studi e restauri dell'Iseo pompeiano nel Museo di Napoli* (Roma, Arti S.p.A., 1992).

<sup>33</sup> Witt, *Isis*, 69. Although Witt echoes some eurocentric notions ("Our western World's Graeco-Roman and Christian civilization has emerged and taken shape out of the cultural melting pot of the Near East."), he presents a great deal of evidence for the theme of this book that Africa was the origin of modern humans whose demic migrations left a significant african legacy to world civilization; e.g., "From Memphis and Alexandria the cult of Isis and her Temple Associates shed an incalculable influence on other rival faiths, including even Christianity." (preface). Witt, a lecturer in Classics at Queen Mary College, University of London, where he specializes in greek and roman religion, has written an indispensable book, first published in 1971, for the education of contemporary classicists and others who denounce "afro-centrism." A Witt sampling: "Egypt for its inhabitants was the Black Land." (14). "Throughout the 4,000 years of Egyptian history every Pharaoh was the incarnation of the youthful Horus, and therefore was the son of Isis, the Goddess Mother who had suckled and reared him." (15). "Herodotus, [who] had earlier stayed in Egypt and had written about its religion...concluded that its gods had been appropriated by the cities of Greece." (16). "Later antiquity could think of Isis as the Egyptian soil which the Nile commingles with and fructifies." (19). "Already in the Ptolemaic age she was known at Philae as Isis of the Innumerable Names. Now, however, she was identified with all the purely anthropomorphic goddesses of the Graeco-Roman Pantheon...Demeter and her daughter Persephone... Pallas Athena...Aphrodite and Venus...Hera... Artemis...Wisdom (Sophia)..."(20). "In Italy itself the Egyptian faith was a dominant force. At Pompeii, as the archaeological evidence reveals...Isis played a major role. In the capitol, temples were built in her honor...obelisks were set up, and emperors bowed to her name. Harbours of Isis were to be found on the Arabian Gulf and the Black Sea. Inscriptions show that she found faithful followers in Gaul and Spain, in Pannonia and Germany. She held sway from Arabia and Asia Minor in the east to Portugal and Britain in the west and shrines were hallowed to her in cities large and small...Beneventum, the Piraeus, London." (21). "The friend of slaves and sinners, of the artisans and the downtrodden, at the same time she heard the prayers of the wealthy..." (23). "The cult of Isis had its cradle in northeast Africa, in Egypt and Ethiopia." (23).

"To understand ancient Egyptian religion at all, and especially the religion of Isis, we must recognize the sacredness of life in all its forms for the whole Nile civilization." (25). "...the cult of animals doubtless followed after the worship of sacred tree..." (26).

“Animals were generally symbols of divinity.” (28). “...the ankh...a case of an Isiac symbol prefiguring a characteristically Christian token, the cross.” (32). “Throughout the long history of Egyptian religion Isis and her brother-husband remained complementary deities.” (36). “...Byblos in Phoenicia...where Egyptian antiquities have been unearthed was a point of economic and religious contact between Phoenicia and the Nile country. It was there that Osiris was assimilated to Adonis (Thammuz) and Isis herself into Astarte (Istar, Ashtaroth).” (43). “...rites of Dionysus and Demeter bore the closest resemblance to those of Osiris and Isis.” ( 67). “...in the Cyclades Isis was blended with Artemis...” (68). “But Isis on Delos is even more than an Egyptian turned Greek. For besides her identification with Aphrodite, Tyche, Nike, Hygieia...and Artemis, she is also invoked as Astarte of Phoenicia, as the Mother of the gods, and as the Great Mother.” (68-69). “The obelisks formerly belonging to the Iseum Campestre are now in the Squares called Pantheon, Dogali, Minerva, and Navona [in Rome].” (87). Among the holy servants of Isis, “The Synod of the Wearers of Black... paid particular devotion to Isis as ‘the black-robed queen.’” (97). “Isis and her companion gods from Egypt gained a foothold in Italian cities by a readiness to take a comparatively low rank...friend of the masses...her home hard by the business and trading center dear to the common man.” (136-137).

“Herodotus states that the first people to institute festivals, processions, and religious presentations were the Egyptians...and the Greeks have got their knowledge from them.” (165). “Isis was an insidiously dangerous foe for Christian theologians because she was believed to give her worshippers their daily bread.” (180). “The ritual of the Christian Church owes a considerable and unacknowledged debt to the Egyptian religion that preceded it in the Graeco-Roman world.” (184). “In the theology and art of Gnosticism Horus and Christ could easily be blended.” (218). “In the middle of the first century AD Isiacism, far from being dead, was in the ascendant.” (259).

“The evidence is unimpeachable that the places where Paul preached cultivated the faith of Isis.” (261). “Augustine...remarks that no idolatry is more profound and more superstitious than that of Egypt.” (262). “... agape is a cult name for Isis, who in Egyptian tradition as old as the Pyramid Texts personifies tenderness, compassion and divine love.” (266). “Clearly the Pauline view of Isiacism was penetratingly critical. Paul’s world was a patriarchy, his religion was Christological and monotheistic, and God was found in fashion as a man. Isis was female, Isis was the champion of idolatry, and Isis was the lover of the Nile menagerie. And yet the Pauline and the Isiac faith had at least one common characteristic. Each swept aside racial and

social distinctions. “There is neither Greek nor Jew... Barbarian, Scythian, bond nor free: but Christ is all, and in all.’ Change Christ to Isis...and the words are still true.” (268). “Giordano Bruno...was convinced that the wisdom and magic-born religion of ancient Egypt excelled the fanatical theology that burnt dissident thinkers as heretics...the unfrocked monk, perished on 1 February 1600 for his intransigent denial that Christianity was unique.” (269).

<sup>34</sup> Schoske, *Egyptian Art in Munich*, 60.

<sup>35</sup> Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum, *dark mother: african origins and godmothers* (Lincoln, NE: Authors Choice Press, an imprint of iUniverse, Inc., 2001), chapter 4.

<sup>36</sup> *Superintendenza Archeologica per le Province di Napoli e Caserta, Alla ricerca di Iside*. Analisi, 7.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 16

<sup>38</sup> “Iside, Mito Mistero Magia,” *Archeologia Viva*, marzo-april 3 1997.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>40</sup> Quoted in Asphodel P. Long, *In a Chariot Drawn by Lions, The Search for the Female in Deity* (Freedom, CA: Crossing Press, 1993), 85. See also David Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses, Visions of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Tradition* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1968).

<sup>41</sup> For Weil, see Birnbaum, *dark mother*, chapter 2.

<sup>42</sup> Birnbaum, *dark mother*, chapter 5.

<sup>43</sup> See Ladislav Segy, *African Sculpture Speaks*, 4th edition, enlarged (New York: Da Capo Press, Inc., a subsidiary of Plenum Publishing Corporation, 1969, 1975), 7. See also Birnbaum, *dark mother*, chapter 4.

<sup>44</sup> “Iside in Mostra a Milano. Un’inedita rassegna a Palazzo Reale,” *Archeologia Viva*, marzo-april 1997. In the hostile protestant environment of the United States, it is remarkable that memory of Isis can be found at all; one significant source for the memory in the United States is Hilda Doolittle’s (H.D.) *Helen in Egypt*. I am indebted to Clare Fischer for presenting this theme to our women’s group.

<sup>45</sup> See Birnbaum, *Black Madonnas* (see note 5).

<sup>46</sup> Quirke & Spencer, *British Museum Book of Ancient Egypt*. For Egyptian interchange with sub-Saharan Nubia, see 39-41, 202-19.

<sup>47</sup> See Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa: African Women & Patriarchy* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995). 32.

<sup>48</sup> M. Thompson Drewal, *Yoruba Ritual*, 72, 130.

<sup>49</sup> See Anna Joyce, “Dark Mother as Symbol of Resistance in Haiti, A Historical Overview,” term paper for class, Dark Mother, *California Institute of Integral Studies*, Spring, 2000.

