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The Role of Ritual in Enhancing Erotic Energy: The Archetype of the *Great Marriage*

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The Great Marriage ritual reflects an ancient erotic paradigm that integrated sex, spirit, and community in societies that worshipped the Goddess. The festivals surrounding the rite of the Great Marriage illustrate the role of community in providing the set (cultural conditioning) and setting (environment) for erotic encounters. The rituals heightened eroticism by providing societal permission to enjoy sexual pleasure. The rites also provided preparatory rituals facilitating a psychological transformation. Costumes and ribald singing etc. empowered the individual to identify with the erotic self. The community role in heightening eroticism continues to be evident in current festivals such as Yani in Latvia, "Lake Lovemaking" in Finland, and The Lifestyle Convention in Reno, Nevada. There is new research from evolutionary biology that supports the notion that unbounded female sexuality during such times was common.

In addition, the Great Marriage ritual revealed to the participants the deeper mysteries of sexuality. The ancient rite was enacted several times a year during the community festivals where it was believed to renew the land for the community. One of the most profound aspects of this sacred ritual was the belief that sexuality was both a form of healing and a pathway to raising the consciousness. The age-old search for ecstatic states is a desire to merge with all of life. Whether practiced in Bronze Age *Goddess* cultures or in modern Tantra, Kundalini Yoga and Chuluaqui-Quodoushka, among others, ritual has distinct aspects that serve to shift the participants from ordinary to extra-ordinary consciousness states.

The elements of the Great Marriage ritual are 1) permission, 2) readiness, 3) self-empowerment, 4) communion, 5) focused will, 6) shifts of perception, and 7) transcendence.

The Role of Ritual in Enhancing Sexual Eroticism

Last year at the Regional Conference in San Francisco, I introduced the ritual of the Great Marriage as an archetype for female sexuality as it was viewed by the cultures that honored the divine feminine. Collectively these are called the Goddess cultures. For those of you that are new to the Goddess information, there are cultures that existed for more than 30,000 years and until around 5 to 8,000 years ago that were women-centered as well as women honoring.

Women's sexual desire in these ancient matrilineal societies was considered an **active, powerful erotic drive**. Their view of women's sexuality was far more life affirming. The wisdom of ancient cultures is that sexual desire is a sacred gift of the Great Mother. In these cultures women were raised to feel plenty of permission to explore sexual pleasure, without judgement, and in a worldview that integrated sexuality with spirituality.

This presentation will be in two parts: First I'll be talking about the festivals surrounding Sacred Marriage rite and their role in enhancing eroticism in the community. The second part will discuss the mystery rites themselves, which were performed in a more private setting. These rites fulfilled sacred purposes as a central part of the ritual. The Sacred Marriage depicts the spiritual meaning of sex and I will present some ideas about the relatively new field of study called Spiritual Sex.

These societies that worshipped the Great Mother valued rather than feared sexual desire and in fact, their festivals celebrated sexual eroticism. Sexual pleasure rather than fertility was foremost. Sexual union was taken very seriously as a sacred and magical act. The Great Marriage ritual was seen as a necessary prerequisite to communal abundance.

The Celtic society was one of the last Goddess cultures to continue performing the Great Marriage. We know that the Beltane festival (from which we derive our May Day celebration) was practiced into the Christian era, until it was ruthlessly stamped out.

Archeologists who wrote about such practices were generally steeped in Victorian mores. They misnamed the rituals "fertility rites" because of patriarchy's prevailing emphasis on procreation as the only proper purpose of sex.

These rites should really be called celebrations of eroticism. The festivities surrounding the rituals in the pagan world included ribald singing, wild dancing, erotic costumes, and drinking libations (in other words, a general good time). They often included some kind of freeing up of marital bonds to allow for sex with partners outside committed pairs. According to Terry Gould, the purpose of the spouse sharing was to:

1. Extend kinship ties
2. Satisfy the innate desire in both men and women for variety in a "blowing off steam" sexuality

The community rituals clearly heightened eroticism for its participants. In

addition, the open expression of women's sexuality functioned as a balancing force to male competitive aggression.

Such open female eroticism in later times was considered to be quite dangerous to society and punishable by law. For example, in medieval times wives were dragged by their husbands to priests and flogged for being "wanton," which meant wanting more sex than their husbands.

During these festivals, the pleasure/erotic aspect of sex was elevated to the priority and the procreative/fertility aspects took a back seat.

In Northern Europe, they drank mead laced with mistletoe (which is still a symbol of license to kiss) in order to minimize the possibility of conception.

Many of the activities in these festivals, such as the ribald joking and erotic exhibitionism demonstrated the unbounded expression of women's sexual energy. Many such rituals were still celebrated just 500 years before the common era. Egypt celebrating the Cat Goddess Bast :

"With its flutes and castanets, its buffoonery and ribaldry its wine drinking and jokes bandied between pilgrims and frank display of genitalia exhibited by the women, this great and raucous celebration on the Nile typifies the kind of women's rituals performed at a number of sites in the ancient world." From the *Metamorphosis of Baubo*

I'd like to give you a bit of background on the ritual of the Sacred Marriage

The earliest known form of religious expression was the worship of the Goddess. In the beginning, as author Merlin Stone says, God was a woman. Earth Mother, Great Mother of All, or Great Goddess were names given to venerate the feminine as the origin of material form. She was the primal creator of all life. Evidence of the Neolithic rock paintings, sculptures and figurines illustrate the veneration of Divine Woman and Her Yoni.

To the ancients, the female genitals had great magical power as the gate to all life. Death was seen as a return to the Mother's womb. Thus, sacred caves represented the womb and burial mounds were sculpted with Yoni-shaped entrances. The worship of the Yoni has continued in secret tantric sects in modern day India. In Europe and the U.S. there are groups that also practice the worship of the Amrita Nectar.

The origins of the Great Marriage ritual itself date back to at least Neolithic times. There is evidence of festivals where a wedding ritual was performed that enacted the mating of a male consort with the Great Goddess. It is entirely possible that the people believed that this sacred marriage strengthened their bond to the Goddess and ensured her abundance.

THE RITUAL OF THE GREAT MARRIAGE reflects the reverence attributed to sexual union and the wide appreciation of its crucial role in continuing a prosperous society. It was enacted several times a year and was believed to *renew the land*.

The High Priestess of early Bronze Age societies was viewed as the earthly representative of the Goddess and she performed the Sacred Marriage with her consort

who sometimes reigned as the temporal king. In Mesopotamian cultures, the “Year God” reigned for only one year. This consort was ritually if not literally sacrificed as part of a rite intended to enact the cycle of death and rebirth. Since kinship and inheritance was matrilineal, royal lineage was traced through the priestesses.

However, from what we know about the Goddess cultures women were not exclusive rulers over men.

Men and women played complimentary roles in what was a partnership model of social organization.

In later Bronze Age Mesopotamia, we know that The GREAT MARRIAGE ritual became institutionalized with the ascendance of patriarchy. It began to serve both a sacred and political purpose. From the study of the ancient city of Uruk around 3,000 BCE, we know that the temple of Inanna served as a court of law, a healing sanctuary and a place of sacred sexual rituals.

Even after patriarchy was well established, the sacred foundation of the king’s rule was always through the Goddess and it was legitimized through the High Priestess as her earthly representative. In Egypt for example, the word Isis was also the word for thrown. The Pharaoh literally sat in the lap of the Great Goddess Isis.

The festivals that celebrated the Goddess and her gift of sexuality became a target of repression from the new social order, which viewed women as property and rigidly proscribed their sexual behavior. The Biblical accusations of the orgies and licentious behavior of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah were really politically motivated. Sodom and Gomorrah were Canaanite cities that held festivals to the Goddess Asherah and her consort Baal. The genocide practiced on these cities was part of the effort to stamp out the worship of the Goddess and her celebrations of open eroticism.

What we know about the Celtic practices in Northern Europe is that the festival following the Sacred Marriage rite was especially valued as time to honor the Goddess and her gift of sexuality by seeking ecstatic union with a partner. The Beltane fires took place all night after the ceremony and couples melted away into the night to make love as a celebration and affirmation of the Goddess’ gift. The ritual became a mystery (secret) as the dominant culture suppressed the older cultural wisdom.

Even in the gynophobic Greek and Roman cultures, we know that women’s sacred rites such as Thesmophoria and Eleusis continued to capture the hearts of the people. The rituals practiced in these annual events were derived from the much earlier worship of the Mother Goddess. What we do not know is precisely what went on in the most secret of practices. The secrecy of the rites was so well protected that no one was ever to write about them in any detail.

Although there was increasing pressure to suppress the worship of the Goddess and the ritual of the Great Marriage, it continued to be practiced during the Celtic quarter days (Nov.1, May 1 and the Winter and Summer solstices). Finally severe persecution and fear eliminated the practice except as a very secret part of societies such as Wicca. [Rumors of orgies on certain witches’ nights still abound] The Goddess mating with the “horned one” (the devil of later times) was an enactment of the feminine sexual energy bonding with male sexual energy. Horns were a universal symbol of male energy.

For over 2,000 years the dominant cultures have approached sexuality from a viewpoint that open expression of eroticism is dangerous to society.

In Patriarchy, sexuality, especially uncontrolled female sexuality as considered unnatural and downright destructive to the fabric of society. Under patriarchal rule, only the powerful male elite managed to get away with orgiastic banquets, concubines and other so-called decadent sexual behavior. The rest of humanity was expected to adhere to significantly rigid and proscribed ways to express their sexuality. Women were expected to remain celibate until a very early marriage (often soon after their first menses) and never to stray from the only male they were given to, as property, by their fathers. The punishment was often death.

By the 19th century, women's sexuality had become so repressed that medical journals debunked the perverted notion that women could have orgasms. Even after the grudging recognition of female sexual response, the notion that women were naturally monogamous and sexually passive held firm. The recent findings from evolutionary biology are beginning to tell us a completely different tale of women's sexuality. The female passivity arguments are crumbling in the light of such researchers as Mary Jane Sherfy who made a great case for the infinite capacity for female sexual pleasure. As far as the "women are naturally monogamous" theory goes, Robin Baker & Mark Bellis argue that women have had many sexual partners in the distant past. They found that only 1% of male sperm is programmed to fertilize and the rest are either blockers or attackers of other male's sperm in the reproductive tract.

The recent DNA studies, reported by Dr. Chung I Wu of the federal human genome project, corroborate Baker and Bellis' discovery of the male sperm competition factor. Yet the vast majority of humanity is still programmed to believe in female passivity and monogamy.

For at least 30,000 years there was an entirely different attitude towards sex. In the cultures that worshipped the Divine Feminine, female sexual assertiveness was considered normal. In fact, wherever women had status and owned property that could be passed on to their daughters, societies had more open attitudes towards sex and women were relatively free to express their sexual desires.

In Mesopotamia, The Great Marriage festival began with a procession of initiates of the temple chanting, singing hymns and blessing the event. The whole community was present and would have witnessed the religious sanction of the sexual rite. The significance of the event for the whole community was a sort of insurance policy for prosperity. The ritual itself was enacted in the temple in a private chamber, with the initiates of the temple combining their focused intent on a powerful magical outcome. The renewal of the land was at stake and probably much more. What followed throughout the rest of the day was feasting, drinking, dancing singing and open eroticism as well.

1) Permission: Lots have been said about the eroticism of the forbidden, but I'd like to make a case for the erotic potential (especially for women) of feeling permission. Permission to be unbounded sexually. Permission to let it go and let it flow with the erotic energy. The fact that the whole community participated and encouraged

erotic expression is a tremendous aphrodisiac.

In the contemporary erotic festivals you can see this element of permission at work.

An example is Yani, the festival in Latvia (as Terry Gould relates) that has been celebrated on the Summer Solstice for the last 5,000 years. People wear pagan costumes, sing lusty songs, and stay up all night expressing open eroticism and spouse sharing. Every adult Latvian is supposed to participate.

In 1999, a festival was dubbed “Lake Lovemaking” in Finland. This consisted of a group of over 5,000 seniors who gathered to show sexuality doesn’t end at a certain age. The sex festival featured erotic statues, exhibits of sex toys, diverse sexual literature and provisions for “a roll in the hay” according to the news articles.

In Reno, Nevada, The Lifestyle Organization held its 26th annual convention in 1999 with over 4,000 participants. For four days couples enjoyed expressing their sexuality. They attended dances in erotic costumes, listened to seminars on the lifestyle and generally celebrated the free expression of their eroticism with others.

Smaller events take place in many communities in the U.S. and Europe. An example is the “Intimacy Oil Experience” sponsored by Tantra enthusiasts

- 2) **Preparation:** Preparation for the Great Marriage included rituals of purification such as bathing and anointing with oils. In addition, rituals of physical adornment such as beautiful garments, make up and hair styles intensified the power of attraction. Such rituals are also a way to underscore that a shift is occurring from ordinary life into heightened erotic energy. Preparation promotes the development of readiness to allow sexual energy to fully awaken.

One of the fundamental principles of awakening desire is to foster the buildup of erotic feelings. The simple concept of preparation fosters a sense of readiness and is fundamental to ritual. Desire is built and excitement is amplified before intense sexual interaction.

- 3) **Self-empowerment:** Costumes are a way to empower the erotic self. We know costuming and exhibitionism is still a vital part of group eroticism in contemporary events such as Mardi Gras and the Yani festival. The ability to take on a new identity is sexually empowering.

The ancient Great Marriage ceremony utilized ritual robes and objects to shift the participants into a new identity—that of the Goddess and her God/Consort. In the festivals surrounding the ritual, the purpose of costumes, erotic songs and sexual exhibitionism is to facilitate the emergence of an erotic identity. The change out of the ordinary into a sexually empowered being enhances erotic feelings and intensifies sexual energy.

There is an ancient magic known as “**glamour**” that is the imaginative **enhancement of magnetic attractiveness**.

The origin of the word dates back to a derivative of the Scottish word, *grammar*, meaning “magic.” There is an interesting definition of glamour in Webster’s

Dictionary, “seemingly mysterious allure, bewitching charm.”
The magic of glamour is in its ability to generate a seductive pull towards sexual pleasure. That is the meaning of magnetic attraction

The elements of permission, preparation and empowerment constitute the first three aspects of the Great Marriage Archetype. The four additional elements of the Great Marriage contain the more esoteric aspects of spiritual sexuality.

The community festivities enhanced the general erotic feelings of the group and promoted the shift into the erotic realm. During the rite itself there is a shift into a new level of awareness. It involves viewing the partner as a precious and divine lover.

This Terracotta Plaque of the sacred marriage between the high priestess and her consort or temporal kind was found in Mesopotamia. It is dated around 2000 B.C.E. (when patriarchy was already well established). The plaque was used as an offering to the Goddess by the people. There were many such plaques found at temple sites. It illustrates the integration of eroticism, heart connection and soul expansion.

When the shift into the *heart connection occurs*, there is a move from personal attachment desire into a sense of communion. The use of breathing techniques, eye contact and awareness of energy are more important than any physical touch to achieve connection with the partner. Similar principles are taught in modern Tantra workshops for enhancing couple relationships. In fact, Tantra enthusiasts refer to Conscious Loving as a way of life. Practicing conscious loving connects partners in ways beyond personal pleasure. It transcends desire that derives from attachment needs. The partner is no longer perceived as “mine,” but as a beloved gift of the Divine.

There is a sacred significance to the sexual union in the Great Marriage ritual that goes beyond the bonding of communion. There are three additional elements that I am suggesting are part of spiritual sex.

The ancients held the view that sexuality was both a healing energy and a pathway to raising the consciousness. The ancients believed that ecstatic union with the Source of the Life Force was the ultimate expression of sexuality.

Those who were initiated into the truth about the mystery of sexual energy were able to use it for sacred purposes. (Many of you have heard of the temple prostitutes). They were *temple priestesses* called sacred virgins. Those who served the Great Mother were “women unto themselves” free of marital bonds. (Thus the original meaning of virgin.) These women were practicing sexual healing and *initiating others into the sexual pathway towards a more expanded consciousness*. Their practices included:

Healing the body-mind-spirit,

Projecting visual imagery to manifest goals,

Divining visions and

Balancing the genders through joining with universal energy.

Kundalini Yoga, Quodoushka, Danika and tantric practices incorporate much of what was originally practiced in the temples of the Goddess. Techniques such as breathing, erotic massage, Yoni pleasuring, visualization, magic and meditation were passed on to the founders of these practices. Tantra Yoga is an example. The Tibetan Yogini whose name means “Adept of Great Bliss” initiated the monk who is credited with founding Tantra. The name Tantra means “The Web” which refers to the ultimate purpose of all sexual energy which is to achieve union with the Life Force.

We are on a new frontier of research which links in the so-called paranormal with eroticism. It is also a very ancient knowledge of the nature of sexual ecstasy.

In 1999, sex therapist and researcher Gina Ogden published the preliminary results of a survey in cooperation with New Woman. More than 1,400 women responded to the questionnaire about Spiritual Sex. [Interestingly, nine out of ten respondents in Gina Ogden’s study ranked a loving relationship as the most important ingredient for spiritual sex.]

Over 91% of the women over 40 said that they had experienced sexual ecstasy. They described experiences such as:

“feelings of oneness with the universe during orgasm”
out of body travel while making love
weeping with the joy of sexual bliss
being enveloped with a loving light
touching souls with the partner.

Clearly, many people are having such experiences and are willing to talk about it.
SHOW SPIRITUAL SEX OVERHEAD

The focus of will is the intent to achieve an expanded awareness. The shift of perception/and the use of visualization during orgasm is the ancient form of magic for the purpose of manifesting desires. Finally, the ecstatic transcendence into an altered state of consciousness is the merging with the life force. Descriptions of sexual ecstasy sound quite similar to near death experiences in some ways.

Extraordinary luminous colors
Feelings of loss of the sense of a physical body
boundless, timeless fusion with universal energy
Merging with the life force

This is a fascinating and new understanding about the nature of sexual energy. I hope to see much greater acceptance of this very life affirming approach.

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