

Language Bias in Tree of Life

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In this essay I suggest that the mythology of “Tree of Life” might have originated from the ancient Egyptian goddess Nut. This argument is based on the possible morphology of associated snake and bird symbolism to the Tree of Life as representing evening and morning in the sky. As a consequence, the idea of “Mother Earth” might be a later development in Mediterranean religions that originally was something like a “Mother Sky”, but which was reversed due to the arising mythology of Tree of Life.

It can be difficult to interpret archeological evidence of ancient religions, due to language biases that affects how people in the modern world think. Therefore, there is a conscious effort needed to address such biases and suggest alternative hypotheses.

One such idea that has affected language bias in religion, is “Father Sky” versus “Mother Earth”. This bias is rooted in “Father Sky”, that might not accurately reflect ancient religions prior to textual records. For example, in ancient Egypt, there is a goddess Nut which represents the night sky and the earth is represented as a male god. This belief seems to contradict the bias of other ancient religions around the Mediterranean where “Mother Earth” is taken for granted.

A way to explain this, is to treat ancient Egypt as an exception. The idea is that “Mother Earth” came first in most places and when patriarchal worldviews took over, the “Father Sky” idea came to dominate the hierarchy in the mythology. Since women in ancient Egypt had seemingly strong social status compared to other places, it is interpreted as a particular local development.

The problem with this typical interpretation, is that “Tree of Life” is ambiguously represented as both fertility and the cosmos in most places, the latter in the form of a “World Tree”. In both cases, there is associated snake and bird symbolism. This points to a later development in mythology. If this was ancient at the time of early Nut worship, the cosmos representation would be less likely. It is less probable that “Tree of Life” originates in fertility and becomes “World Tree” for the cosmos without a corresponding “Mother Sky”, which is found only in ancient Egypt. The more probable direction is the other way, with the loss of “Mother Sky” along the way.

Nut (the sky) was believed to have continuous intercourse with Geb (the earth). A possible erotic symbolism of “Tree of Life”, or “World Tree”, could have been the trunk representing the penis and the branches and leaves representing the vagina. At the time, the snake and the bird could have represented evening and morning in the sky, due to the “whispering” sound of prayers in the evening to not disturb the sleep of workers, related to snakes, and the “singing” sound of wakeups in morning to engage workers, related to birds. This gives a simultaneous mythology of life as both requiring fertility and working routine. However, this was based on the idea of the sky signaling time for work and sleep, unlike the idea of “Tree of Life” as being an agricultural symbolism. In a such context, there is no need for “Tree of Life” yet to occur. This opens up the possibility of “Tree of Life” being a later development.

In order to export Nut worship to new regions, the sexual nature might have been downplayed over time. This could be the origin of “World Tree” as a cosmic metaphor for Nut, connecting the snake (evening) and the bird (morning). A such development might have contributed to perception of “Tree of Life” as taking place, somewhere, on the ground (aka the biblical Garden of Eden). Thus “Mother Earth” was born and in response, a “Father Sky” was created. The reversal was complete, with the “Mother Sky” being forgotten and a dominating god (male) filling in the void.