

Early and Late Eroticism of The Sky Goddess

by Sven Nilsen, 2023

In this essay I suggest a dynamics in language bias of how Nut worship in ancient Egypt might have caused the spread of “Tree of Life” in religions around the Mediterranean, by first initiating myths of eternal glory by heroic deeds, with male protagonists, annotated as “Early Eroticism” in interaction with ancient Egyptian mythology, using erotic associations. This phase might have been followed by an arising fear of ambiguity, concerning personal vs transactional immortality, annotated as “Late Eroticism”. This depicts “Tree of Life” as both a way of resolving this ambiguity and an early democratization of achieving immortality to include the female gender.

In a previous essay “Language Bias in Tree of Life”, I suggested that the mythology of “Tree of Life” might have originated from the ancient Egyptian goddess Nut. The motivation for this hypothesis was that “Tree of Life” mythology is used ambiguously with “World Tree”, in both cases including associated snake and bird symbolism. By connecting snake and bird symbolism to evening and morning mythology in ancient Egypt, one can consider “Tree of Life” as resulting from erotic symbolism of Nut worship. This explains the emphasis on “Mother Earth” in other religions as “Tree of Life” was interpreted taking place on the ground, yet preserving some of its cosmic interpretation through “World Tree” mythology, but without the corresponding “Mother Sky” bias. However, one must also explain how symbolism of Nut worship caused spread of “Tree of Life”.

Among scholars, it is considered a likely hypothesis that popularization of immortality in religions around the Mediterranean might have been fuelled by a democratization process of The Book of The Dead used by ancient Egyptian pharaohs, such that lesser nobels also had the opportunity to achieve immortality upon death. This puts Nut worship, which was central to ancient Egyptian pharaohs, into the center of this process. Yet, there is another widespread mythology “Tree of Life” that also offers immortality. The strange thing about this is that Nut worship did not propagate, but holy scriptures did, so how could the new holy scriptures put much emphasis on “Tree of Life”?

One hypothesis is that “Tree of Life” existed as a mythology spread through oral traditions prior to distribution of holy scriptures. Using this hypothesis, one imagines that the increase of literacy was almost decoupled from the content of the texts. This is like, as if, people wanted to write down their beliefs, in order to exert their own influence, instead of wanting to read other people’s beliefs and being influenced by other cultures. As common sense suggests, neither option could have existed without the possibility of the other. This means that oral traditions might not be the full story.

On the other hand, if “Tree of Life” was popularized with increasing literacy and new holy scriptures, not only recording down existing oral traditions, there could have been some transition from Nut worship into “Tree of Life”. It is worth keeping in mind that the spread of “Tree of Life” must be seen as an integration of new holy scriptures with existing local beliefs and culture. Religions are both influenced by senders and receivers, since easy adoption increases spread.

There are two types of likely prior beliefs to consider:

1. An existing belief in a Sky Goddess
2. An existing belief in a Fertility Goddess

In ancient Mediterranean religions, the most dominant form of mythology was a phantoon consisting of both gods and goddesses. Some gods were androgynous. The gender of divinity plays a role, not in the divinity itself, but in the interaction between the worshipper and the beliefs. In this setting, the spread of “Tree of Life” does not mean that all forms of Sky Goddesses were turned into “Mother Earth”. On the contrary, the proliferation of Sky Goddesses, existing simultaneously, is contrasted with the absence of such interpretations related to “Tree of Life”, which was majorly considered related to the ground, by fertility, and in the cosmic interpretation as a “World Tree”. The loss of “Mother Sky” is considered locally within the interpretation of “Tree of Life”.

For the case of an existing belief in a Fertility Goddess, new influences of “Tree of Life” are easy to adopt by identifying the goddess in a story with another goddess in other written stories or oral traditions. This mechanism merely enforces the interpretation of “Tree of Life” as taking place on the ground.

For the case of an existing belief in a Sky Goddess, I suggest two periods of influence: “Early Eroticism” and “Late Eroticism”. In the period of “Early Eroticism”, there are two things combined that indicate interaction with Nut worship. First, the spread of popular epics with male protagonists achieving eternal glory (e.g. Epic of Gilgamesh). Second, the belief that Nut (the sky) had continuous intercourse with Geb (the earth). When these two things are connected using erotic associations, the natural interpretation is to think of the process of achieving immortality as a reward for heroic deeds, similar to winning a mate, by the male hero appearing visibly on the sky as a star. In many oral traditions, the glory of becoming star, or a star image, is popular. Yet, the erotic associations are specific when the Sky Goddess is believed to have continuous intercourse with an Earth God. This development leads to an anxiety by the elder ruler, or ambition by the younger ruler, that the Sky Goddess “deceives” the hero by offering a temporary pleasure and gives birth to a demigod. Such stories were popular and contributes to the phase hypothesized as “Late Eroticism”.

Late Eroticism produces stories where male protagonists are not only achieving eternal glory, but also are destined to perform heroic deeds. Curses or blessings, by gods and goddesses, are used as literary devices to build anticipation in the climax curve. At the same time, the belief in eternal bliss as reward is fading and the ruler takes on a sacrificial role. An eternal battle in the afterlife is introduced to preserve the functional world and to prevent time from ending. The hero is not only achieving glory through destined heroic deeds, but also exiting the scene as the tragic hero, where eternal pain and struggle is used to intensify the pleasure of the moment, of being alive.

It is in the background of Late Eroticism that “Tree of Life” appears. The ambiguity of personal vs transactional immortality causes a desire for undeifying the immortality process. By removing the Sky Goddess and exploiting erotic symbolism, the “Tree of Life” no longer represents the continuous intercourse between Nut and Geb, but becomes a literal place on the ground and in metaphorical sense for the cosmos, a “World Tree”. This is done to ensure that there is no mind behind “eating the fruit” that can deceive the hero. The picture of “Tree of Life” changes from the sky into a lost or secret place on Earth, associated a Holy Quest that makes the hero deserving of the reward, followed by a guaranteed material process in which the final step toward immortality is taken. The Sky Goddess is committed to this act, observing and supporting the hero from heaven.

The concretization of “Tree of Life” spreads faster than the corresponding divine erotic symbolism, due to the focus on an act, taking place in space and time, that can be communicated as a narrative. At the same time, the stories “hint at” the female divinity behind it, aluring believers toward seeing the world in the sense of a cosmic “World Tree”. Among female believers, this also opens up the possibility of gaining immortality, so “Tree of Life” becomes, not just a dogmatic belief, but something to be “owned”, a kind of divine femininity. Thus the Sky Goddess gets embedded into the body of the female believer, and with it, since Nut had wings, the mythology of fallen angels.