

leave feminism(s) open to the various possibilities that might make up a future not marked by domination.

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See also Lesbianism; Menchú, Rigoberta; Mujerista Tradition; Pappenheim, Bertha; Womanist Traditions; Woman's Bible, The.

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Fertility and Barrenness

Women's fertility is a subject of great seriousness in all of the world's religious traditions. Most religions consider childbearing one of women's most important societal functions. It is very common for women, and in

some cases men, to seek religious means to attempt to secure fertility for themselves, or to alleviate problems involving a woman's fertility. Fertility is often conceptualized, in some traditions through cosmogonic myths telling of divine fertility, as instigating the very creation of the physical world and its sentient populations. Ritual practices concerned with women's fertility are often explained as attempts to emulate the mythic forces that incited human procreation.

There are many different perspectives from which to analyze a given religion's approach to fertility. This article focuses on the religious strategies of myth and ritual as they relate to fertility. Myths that address women's fertility help illuminate how certain foundational beliefs arose, and ritual practices illustrate how these beliefs are often concretized through repetitive experience. In this way, fertility rites are passed on from generation to generation often linking the fertility of the field with that of a woman's womb.

It is not uncommon that a religious tradition mythologizes its matriarchs as barren and in need of some kind of divine intervention to instigate conception. For example, in the Hebrew Bible, the wives of the three patriarchs in the Book of Genesis, Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel, are all barren until God blesses their wombs with a male child. The New Testament also casts Mary's cousin Elizabeth as barren until she is blessed by God with her male child, John. In these instances, fertility is seen as a kind of divine gift, a reward after much suffering and hardship. Such a gift ensures the longevity of the lineage, which has been endowed with God's promise to continue and be fruitful.

The rhetoric common throughout the Bible is that the male carries the seed that will propagate the species while the female is likened to the soil in which the lineage is nurtured. According to this imagery, the seed carries the honor of a patriarchal society while the soil sustains this honor by continuing the male line of succession. In the Islamic tradition, the conception of women as soil implies that women are inherently shameful because they lack the seeds of honor, that is, the power to create and project themselves onto future generations. This shamefulness is a kind of indiscriminate fecundity that requires limits. A woman's value as alleged in Turkish Islamic village society, for example, depends on her ability to guarantee the legitimacy of her husband's seed. The emphasis here, as in many traditional societies, is on producing a male child as an heir to the patriline. A Muslim wife is expected to continue to bear children until a male is born.

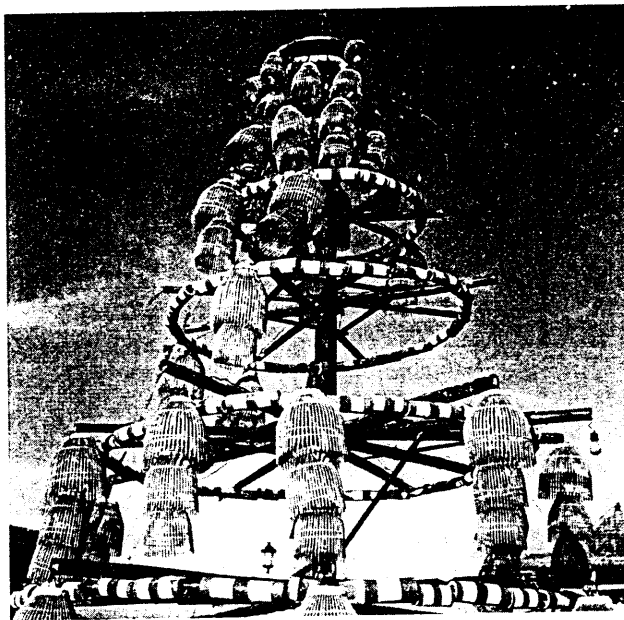
Fertility is relevant to both men and women; rarely, however, do the same pressures exist for men within a given tradition to prove the purity and certitude of

their fertility as those that exist for women. Some traditions have developed male cults that engage in ritual practice ostensibly to request a deity to bless both the earth and the women with fertile soil (or wombs). The goddess cult of the pagan people in the highlands of Papua New Guinea is one example. Here, it is the male cult that is fully responsible for conducting rituals that will honor and court the goddess who bestows fertility on the women of the tribe. The cult acts as a blueprint for male control over women in all arenas of life. The goddess negates the idea that males themselves create fertility and simultaneously affirms that women are entirely responsible for it.

Many traditions believe that fertility is a reward for propitiation of certain deities or goddesses. In China and Japan, Kuan Yin is the female Buddha believed to be the giver of children. Known as Hariti in Indian Buddhism, she is thought to be both devourer and restorer of children and fertility. Among the Shakta tradition of Hindu worshipers, there is a secret ritual that invokes the goddess to make the womb fertile. A young virgin's menstrual blood is used along with other bodily fluids as food offerings to the insatiable goddess who is invoked by the temple prostitutes, or *devadāsīs*. This secret fertility ritual is performed at night under highly guarded conditions. The purpose of this ritual is to maintain the male line of descendants because the failure of a woman to produce a male heir is considered the ultimate calamity. Thus, the withholding of fertility is alleged to bring finality, death, and terror to the whole group of believers.

One of the most interesting fertility cults exists among North African women, especially in the Sudan and Egypt. The Zar cult incorporates aspects of both Christianity and Islam; it involves spirit possession, which in this particular context may be associated with the loss of virginity. The *zayran* spirits are held responsible for numerous fertility disorders: they are believed to hold or seize the womb to prevent conception, or to loosen a fetus resulting in a miscarriage. Since the production of healthy male children is an imperative among North African women, those women who have successfully negotiated these spirit possessions have the greatest social status within their village. In this society, children are the highest form of capital a woman can hope to accumulate, and any impediments to fertility are believed to have grave consequences for a woman.

Barren women in most religious traditions are met with varying degrees of disrespect, ranging from pity to ostracism to banishment from the social group. In some cultures, such as Japan, there are extensive rituals available for aborted fetuses and miscarriages that are meant to alleviate the pain of a failed birth. In many so-



A colorful fertility tree of baskets and lights, Philippines (Paul Almasy/© Corbis)

cieties, however, the state of being barren is considered a divine punishment that often has no religious remedy and which results in the pronounced lack of status for a woman and often the lack of any opportunity to alter her standing within society. Therefore, where there are rituals available for women that attempt to court divine favor for their wombs, to hope and pray for the blessing usually of a male child, most women have no choice but to participate.

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