



## Sacred Mother Earth

# MOTHER EARTH

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Those who are closest to the earth, if they have not been contaminated by the demands of the so-called 'civilised' countries, are often those who have most respect for it. Sadly, such respect is not so often shown nowadays.

Before the coming of the European, pre-industrial societies like the Maori and the American Indian tribes did not have the European concept of land ownership. On the contrary, they felt that they belonged to the land. They were acutely aware that they themselves, as well as all the plants and animals they depended upon, sprang from it. It is not surprising, therefore, that such unspoilt peoples looked upon the earth as the Great Mother, and in fact worship of Mother Earth, from archaeological evidence, appears to have been almost universal in the distant past. Janet and Colin Bard's book *Earth Rites* says:

*American-Indian creation myths tell how man came from deep inside the Earth Mother, after living and maturing for a while in her womb. Such a belief may once have been worldwide, though it naturally took many forms, and many subsidiary beliefs developed. The Apache Indians saw the earth as their mother, facing upwards, and the sky as their father, facing downwards.*

The similarity to the Maori view of Papa and Rangi is striking, but there are many similarities between the ways various early societies saw the body of the Earth Mother. *Earth Rites* continues:



*Terrestrial water sources were likened to a mother's nourishing breast milk, the most potent sources being wells and springs where pure water bubbled up out of the earth. In Britain and elsewhere*

*such places were considered to be holy, and all manner of effects were attributed to the power in the water. Belief in the special qualities of sacred waters has persisted to the present day.*

*There are many other traces of belief in the earth as a living being ... People who acknowledged the great Earth Mother naturally saw her body in their landscape. An obvious example of this is in the naming of two breast-shaped hills in County Kerry as the Paps of Anu (a Celtic earth goddess).*

There are countless examples of this same view of hills as breasts in the British Isles alone, as in the Paps of Jura, the Pap of Glencoe, Cioch na h-Oighe on Arran and so on. In the various languages of the world, other parts of the body ('head', 'arm' and 'shoulder' for example) are used to describe hill features, showing that the landscape was seen as the mother's body.



Demter and Persephone

*Nor did the belief in an Earth Mother disappear with the passage of time. It found expression in a multiplicity of goddesses around the world, all of them involved in the continuation of life and fertility. There was, for example, the Greek goddess Gaea, Gaia or Ge; the Roman earth-goddess and goddess of fecundity Tellus Mater; ... the Slavonic 'Moist Mother Earth', Mati-Syra-Zemlya; the Finno-Ugric Mother of Mannu, earth divinity; and the earth and mother goddess of the Aztecs in South America, Coatlicue.*

These examples of reverence for the earth we live on are all from the past. Unfortunately, this attitude has not persisted to modern times, particularly in the

industrial or developed countries. The change has been brought about not merely by a drive to exploit the products of the earth, but basically by a change in religious attitude. Man began to see himself as the special creation of God and the rest of creation as made for his own use, instead of seeing himself as intrinsically part of the world of life, at one with the plants and animals.

The results of this change of attitude can be seen all around us in the devastation of our environment, though perhaps less clearly in New Zealand than in many other parts of the world. Nevertheless, a country that was once thickly forested is rapidly losing the remnants of woodland that we still have. This is the reason for the erosion that degrades our hill pastures, the slips that threaten our roads and houses, the droughts in the eastern areas and the floods that devastate our river valleys and lowlands. Trees not only hold the soil together, a forest acts as a giant sponge that soaks up rain, absorbing a vast amount of water and releasing it slowly instead of by flash floods. Trees also ameliorate the climate of the whole country, tending to make it more equable.

Apart from human depredation, great damage has been caused to indigenous life by the many plants and animals that have been introduced into this country. One has only to think of the damage to our environment caused by exotics like rabbits, possums, goats and wasps, but even relatively harmless species like sparrows and thrushes have helped to oust native birds to the brink of extinction. However, most harm has been caused to native birdlife by predators like stoats, weasels, rats, cats and dogs.

Nevertheless, this country is still relatively unspoilt compared to most of the rest of the world, and it has an enviable reputation for the creation of national parks, the work of such organisations as Royal Forest and Bird, Manu Society and Native Forest Restoration Trust, and the efforts of recent years to save native life in island and even mainland reserves. David Bellamy ends his book *on Moa's Ark* by saying:

*This is the greenest country in the world in more ways than one, shouting a message of hope to a dying world. I tell you, if New Zealand can't make it work, the rest of the world hasn't got a chance.*

Though this may make us feel like congratulating ourselves, the warning contained in these words is too dire to ignore. Our own existence is threatened by our reckless plunder of Mother Earth's resources, and thoughtless spoliation of her body. Before it is too late, we must do our best to revive the ancient reverence for our world as Mother of all her living children and mourn the loss of those that have disappeared for ever from the physical plane. 