Momolina Marconi: An Italian Passionate Scholar of the Goddess

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When I was a student in my teens, I attended the Liceo Classico, which in Italy is still considered the pillar of education: a five year high school where the basic subjects are Latin and Greek, Philosophy, and History. Usually, the Greek and Latin teachers, both female and male, seem to preserve some of the ancient inspiration hidden in the texts they treat, and, for me, one of the most vivid recollections of those years is the inspired way they would speak, declaiming the words of authors, flowing through their mouths like streams of forgotten and hidden wisdom.

Similarly, I remember I was struck by the Greek verbal system of tenses, of one tense in particular, called “aorist.” “Aorist” refers to a past which we had to translate as a present, as our teachers repeatedly invited us to do, which would cause in us not a small embarrassment, for we didn't grasp the reason of its uncommon use. Only many years later, while studying some of the Native American tongues, did I suddenly get that meaning. In fact, I learned that in the Hopi language, for example, the expected division of time in three great indicators — past, present and future, which is based on the linear vision of time dominating in all the Indo-European languages — doesn’t exit. The Hopi have just two great categories to allocate an action in time: a past which is contained in the present action, which gives name to a tense called objective or manifested, and a present (subjective or not yet manifested), which contains as a premise what is going to happen next.1 The ancient Greek still displayed, also in its sentence structure, a way of organizing thought and language more linked to a circular and cyclic conception on life.

Momolina Marconi (1912-2006), who was a University teacher all her life, writes in similarly inspired prose. The syntax of her writing brings me back to my earlier classroom experiences. This is what also makes her writing challenging to read nowadays, when the majority of us have lost the taste for a wondrous lexicon and an articulated sentence structure. From the 1940s to the 1970s, Marconi was in charge of History of Religion (Università degli Studi di Milano) and was deep inside mythology, literature, linguistic and visual arts, covering an area which extends from the Mediterranean Sea to the river Hindus. Her major work, Riflessi Mediterranei nella più antica Religione Laziale (Mediterranean Reflections of the Oldest Latial Religion), was published in 1939. Searching for the most ancient layers of the Mediterranean religious beliefs, her main point stands on “the study of the linguistic survivals of the Mediterranean Italy in the Indo-European Italy, and on the study of religious survivals...particularly of some female goddesses,” so deeply rooted throughout all regions of Italy that they can be still found in the Latin and Roman pantheon, if you are able and patient enough to “follow and dig more deeply the tracks traced in these fields by preceding scholars.”2

Marconi’s work relies on her vast knowledge of the classical sources, of the roots of names of places, often very far from one another, and of the attributes of each divinity. She has a strong memory for cataloguing place-names and epithets and a brilliant ability to create new connections and discover unexpected analogies which, enlarging the frame of her sight, reveal the common features of a civilization she calls “Mediterranean” or “Pelasgian.”

It would be impossible in this essay to give full evidence to the richness of her way of proceeding. I will address one example, which concerns the tracing of the area of the presence of Kirke, the famous magician encountered by Ulysses in the Odyssey.3 Marconi discusses this topic in two essays, “Da Circe a Morgana” (From Kirke to Morgana, 1941) and “Kirke” (1942), where she is able to uncover the Kerketai in the Caucasian zone (the old way to indicate the local
population later called Circassian), the *Gergithes* in Anatolian Troade, and the *Gergesaias* in Palestina, all names indicating “the people of Kirke.” Additionally, she points out that the root *kirk-*, *kerk-* can be frequently found in a vast area spreading from the island of *Kerkyra* in the Adriatic Sea to the city of *Kirkesion* in Mesopotamia, from Egypt to Thracia and Illyricum, and much farther eastward, among the Indian populations, where peoples known as *Kerkitai* (*ethnos Indikòn*) and *Kolkoi Indicoi* used to live. Marconi also notes that *Kolkoi* (Korkai, Kolkai) was the name of an important commercial and maritime city in the northeastern part of Cape Comorin in the south of India; it was the ancient capital of the reign of Pandjas, the cradle of the southern Indian civilization and home of three mythical brothers who were said to be the founders of the reigns of Pandja, Khera, and Khola.

The main figure that emerges from Marconi’s research, and who is also the key to reaching these deeper layers of history, is a powerful female figure, more ancient than her own names. In the beginning lines of this most renowned essay, Marconi depicts her with loving accuracy, stating:

> Everlasting is the fascination proceeding from divine feminine beings, wonderfully skilled in magic and medicine arts, who alone know the virtues of certain herbs, of certain flowers they arrange in filters and beverages, giving death and life, disease and health in the vast reign of Nature.⁴

The subtitle of “*Da Circe a Morgana*” states: “How Kirke and Morgana can be interpreted pointing out the features linking them to the great goddess of the Mediterranean religion.” Marconi writes:

If we go back in time with our survey, we always find a goddess, Kirke, Pasiphae, Medea, Hecate, Agamede or Mestra, who well knows the secret properties of the plants...
This is true because speaking of *pharmaka* (remedies) we enter the field of the great Mediterranean *potnia*, who ‘feeds all the beings on the earth, those who live on the divine earth, in the sea, in the air.’ She rules the vegetable world made up of an endless range of colours and smells, stalks and corollas, buds and blooms, thousands of infinitesimal lives forming the secret treasure of the great goddess, who knows as many medicines as the wide earth can produce.

Classical poets used to depict absolutely beautiful pictures of these divine experts in magical and healthy arts just as the Mediterranean people had seen and adored them in their worshipping, initially performed in the open air on the green top of a hill, in the shining clearings of a wood, in the murky shores of a lake, in the calm bend of a river where the water flows more quietly…..The most famous of them is perhaps Kirke, the magician with beautiful braids, who lives alone in a shining palace rising up like an architectural miracle in the middle of the luxuriant green area of Aeaea.⁵

The topic of the 'open-air cult' is also found in another of Marconi’s essays, “*Gli asfodeli alle soglie dell’Ade*” (The Asphodels at the Threshold of Hades). Published in 1985, it is one of Marconi’s last essays:
Trees then in the backstage. But somewhere else trees strengthened by sacredness: like the poplar forest surrounded by a meadow with a spring dedicated to Athena near the palace of Alcinous where Ulysses stops to pray; it is a beautiful example of open-air cult of the goddess as phytia, ‘creator’, an attribute she maintained even when the olive tree was considered one of her gifts to mankind…Similarly Demeter, the goddess of grain, cared about a holy wood, which according to Callimachus was also an orchard, where once, in order to protect one of her poplars, the goddess did not hesitate to punish Erysichton’s obstinate violence….It is not surprising that, even at the threshold of Hades, a wood and a meadow of asphodels were dedicated to Persephone, as this goddess experienced her great metamorphosis on a blooming meadow: ‘whereon they reached the meadow of Asphodel, where dwell the souls and shadows of them that can labour no more.’

When the temple of Hera was rediscovered at the mouth of the river Sele (in southern Italy), Momolina Marconi wrote in “Il santuario di Hera alla foce del Sele” (The shrine of Hera at the mouth of the Sele, 1939):

Let’s stop for a while to observe the worship place: it is located at the mouth of the Sele which flows between two black hedges of trees as old as time. It is the last dying memory of the large forests which once used to cover its banks and where flocks of birds still come and stop in spring and in fall while migrating towards the north or the hot regions of Africa. The forest and the waters are considered two typical elements of a very ancient Mediterranean cult of Hera and many other similar divine figures, first and foremost Leto/Latona, a goddess of Aegean-Anatolian origin. Being in the Lycean and Ephesian land, she is pleased to be in the forests and near the waters, two essential and inseparable elements to her life of potnia phyton (lady of the plants) and at the same time potnia orniton (lady of the birds).

Marconi notes, as in the cult of Leto, in the cult of Hera, too, the forest rises up in the air as a huge cathedral; and we can easily imagine it as populated by the huge and varied zoomorphic family as replete with a wide and varied collection of herbs and flowers. They form the secret garden of the goddess from which she alone can extract magic and healthy potions… In the cult of Hera, there is a calm mirror of water on the banks of which she appears… Hence, we are talking about an original identity, which cannot be neglected; an identity enabling me to find in the western Mediterranean area the same forms of cult dominating the Aegean-Anatolian world…

(The whole Italian peninsular) area, where small groups of Mediterranean people used to land, one after the other over a short period of time and bringing with them their tutelary deity, who was nothing but one form of the only great Mediterranean goddess, so, as I was saying, this whole area was full of wild and healthy cults, each one referring to a divine personality, the lady of a hortus conclusus (an enclosed garden), an unlimited source of any kind of spells.

The fact that in the most ancient religions in human history, the cult could only occur in the open air — or more precisely in a space not built by human hands, as the Celts still
maintained — is a motif that the pre-patriarchal civilizations all over the world have in common. I will mention just one example, which still exists in the Japanese archipelago of Okinawa. In what is considered the most ancient form of Japanese religion, the Ryu-Kyu Shinto, where priestly duties are performed exclusively by women, there is no difference between the worshipped divinity and the place of the cult (utakis). Because the sacredness of these places is full of divine essence, the divinities themselves are simply called by the name of that place.

In this form of ancient Shinto, where no central authority rules the beliefs, every priestess (noros and tsukasas) enjoys a full independence as regards to the mythology and the form of the cult of which she is the mediator and warrant. Kinamon, the main divine character in this system of beliefs, who is also called Nirai-Kanai (actually a dual creature, being at the same time male and female, which is very common in the most ancient creation myths all over the world), is not worshipped in a temple but in the trees and in the rocks, where she came down at the beginning of creation.

As a result, these places are so holy that they cannot be acceded by anybody but the priestesses and only on some occasions. The access is strictly limited or even forbidden: on the whole island of Kudaka, where the first human creature was created by Nirai-Kanai’s daughter, no one is allowed to live, as in the western beach of Okinawa where, up to the beginning of the Second World War, only the kami-tsukasas were admitted.

Even when and where a human intervention was carried out to underline the attention and care paid to a sacred place — a practice that finally led in Europe to the erection of the first temples imitating the natural environment through columns of stone where air was still left free to breathe among the marble trunks — the cult, be it for a holy mountain (like Fujiyama for the whole of Japan), a hole, a clearing of grass or sand, a hidden spring in a forest, a cave, a cavern, a wall of rock, a grove, a single tree or simple thick stones “from which the sun rises,” had to be in the open air.

As Marconi’s work demonstrates, we must not be surprised that, many centuries after Kirke, Morgana, the heiress of an uninterrupted tradition of wisdom and worship, “lives alone in Avalon, a western island, because this is what her superhuman nature commands.” But, according to Marconi, Morgana:

despises loneliness, and so attracts the bravest knights to her island or she moves from here in search of adventures. Avalon looks like Aeaea (the original land of Circe situated in Colchis overlooking the Eastern Black Sea). The magician needs a far-off land away from humans to which people can have access only if assisted by divine help, where the goddess can perform the most varied metamorphoses, be surrounded by faithful animals, cultivate particularly useful herbs and plants for her activity, prepare strange potions and balsams, in short, be free to perform her secret art. Even when the goddess is not on a real island, she lives…in remote and inaccessible places where a man cannot enter safely without her will or without being called by her voice.

It is relevant to note Marconi’s use of the term potnia is clearly distinct and should not be confused with the term goddess, which is proper only for the Indo-European layer. In fact, the concept — and the word — god/goddess enters history only after the disruption of the Mother Civilization and was introduced by the patriarchal peoples who rejected the balanced and peaceful civilization of the mothers, who venerated She who ‘feeds all the beings on the earth, those who live on the divine earth, in the sea, in the air’; She who gives life and form; She who is
the Divine in Nature, who is Everywhere in the cosmos. This She is the primal source of life, conscience and harmony. Goddesses are the “diasporized” female figures — the matrilineal clans scattered, a woman given to each man, her functions and abilities a resource for the patriarchal family — in the masculine pantheons of Gods.\(^\text{12}\)

This all-containing \textit{potnia} (a Greek noun that shares the same root as the Italian “potere, potenza” and the English “power,” and which probably translated a lost pre-Indo-European term for the Mother of All, the Creatrix, the Giver of Birth, Growth, Death and Regeneration\(^\text{13}\)), often has a male figure at her side, which is her son/lover, her mate and her fruit, her \textit{paredros} (one who is sitting beside), the first God of Vegetation, the Horned God, the male devoted to the mother (such as the many figurines of Hercules and agricultural Mars widely found throughout the Italian peninsula and clearly preceding the myth developed around him in Greek Mythology), the Hero sacred to Hera, the Medieval champion devoted to his Lady, who survived up to his final transformation into the Devil of the Witches in the Burning Times.

Furthermore, Momolina Marconi argues, She can be a \textit{potnia phytôn} (lady of the plants) and a \textit{potnia therôn} (lady of the wild animals). Here I note that the term \textit{potnia phytôn} is mainly found in the west Mediterranean area, while on the Greek-Anatolic side Her image prevailed as \textit{potnia therôn}. In either case, She is the untamed Lady of the Wild, of the beasts, of the flowers, of herbs and trees, from which developed all the “Italian goddesses” (Marica, Feronia, Angizia, Kirke, Mestra, Agamede, Bona Dea, Hygieia, Diana, Flora, and many others), whose major traits, already present in Kirke, witness a progressive differentiation from Her primary Kolkidian form, spread over the southwestern coasts of Europe. In Italy, we have an abundance of “Ladies of the Vegetable World,” of “Magicians” who bore the traits that later turned them into fairies and later on into witches.

The boundaries of the Mediterranean civilization traced by Momolina Marconi cannot be confined within traditional geographical borders. They stretch from the British Isles to the Hindus Valley down to Cape Comorin on the south end of India. In the Introduction to \textit{Riflessi Mediterranei nella più antica Religione Laziale}, while delineating a general frame of the oldest populations who inhabited the Italian peninsula before the arrival of the eastern migrants, Marconi writes:

\begin{quote}
Special religious analogies and a substantial religious community between the eastern and western Mediterranean coasts outline a cultural unity in the primeval layers of all the Mediterranean countries belonging to the Neolithic and Eneolithic era.\(^\text{14}\)
\end{quote}

Marconi, a historic foremother, intuited what has later been confirmed by findings in genetics regarding African origins and by Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum’s work in feminist cultural history.\(^\text{15}\) Although using the scholarly vernacular of her time, (i.e. “primitive” and “negroid”) that was considered acceptable in an academia dominated by white male elites before the sweeping changes of the 1960s, Marconi upholds that the great Mediterranean civilization, which hinges on a female goddess, passes through the Black Sea, the Tigris and Euphrates river valleys and reaches the Hindus Valley (finding support in the archaeological discoveries of G. Childe, 1935, and of E. Mackay, 1936):

\begin{quote}
The findings in Mohenjo Daro and Harappa reveal previously undiscovered links between the Anatolic-Aegean religious world and the pre-Arian India, and make us think of the Dravidians as a western origin population which, mixing with the primitive negroid
\end{quote}
population, was the vehicle of the Mediterranean civilization that reached the Ganges’s river mouth and Ceylon...They were the Pelasgians, a dolichomorphus Mediterranean Pre-Indo-European people, who attested their presence, from the time of the Upper-Paleolithic, westward and eastward into the Aegeo-Anatolian area....

In Italy, we can find traces of these early populations basically in the North with the Ligures and in the central-southern part (including Sardinia) with the Sicules. Probably they came from Africa, spreading eastward and westward....Only in the final part of the Bronze Age, and during the beginning of the archaic part of the Iron Age, it is possible to find traces of a newly arriving people...These are the Proto-Villanovians who, pressed by ethnic upheavals in the Balkan area, arrived as migrants, some walking up to Veneto, others sailing the sea and the rivers up to the zone surrounding Mantova, others founding two colonies nearby Ancona and Matera. But the main stream, in subsequent waves, landed in the area of Rimini. From there, through the Apennines mountains, they penetrated the upper Tiber valley, running along the Tuscan and Latial coasts; however they never landed on the Adriatic regions of Central Italy (today Abruzzi), where the descendants of the Neolithic peoples remained untouched....

They weren’t sailors nor conquerors, but small groups of people practising agriculture, forced to abandon their lands on the eastern side of the Adriatic Sea, and looking for new land to plough.....Along the slopes of the Alban hills they built round hut villages...From the name of the region in which they established, they were later called Latins, not having a definite name before. Different from the indigenous Mediterraneans, living there since the Neo-Eneolithic times — already Indo-European in language — who used to, since uncountable time, bury their dead, these new Villanovian immigrated peoples practised cremation as funeral rites.16

This demonstrates why the early Roman pantheon did not belong to the Greek-Indo-European religion. In this way, Marconi underlines the continuity between what Italy had been before the foundation and the rising of Rome, just as Jane Ellen Harrison had done for Greece,17 reconstructing the more ancient layers before the invention of the Olympians. Neither Athens nor Rome rose from nothing, nor can they be considered the miracle of a sudden civilization without roots in the land and in the previous local traditions. In addition, the map that Marconi reconstructs lines up with the map Marija Gimbutas identified for the Balkans, in the northeastern area of the Adriatic and north of the Aegean Sea, where the civilizations of the Danube flourished. There is no evidence left that Marconi had knowledge of either Harrison's (1850-1928) work or Gimbutas' (1921-1994) work, just a surprising synchronicity of the same flow of re-emerging memories.

In closing, let’s look at what Marconi writes about the substance of myths and rituals. She affords this fascinating topic in her 1969-70 academic course. She defines myth as “sacred history” and as “pronounced word which is repeated again and again because it owns decisive power in that it is referred to a divinity.” Then she classifies myths and rituals, gradating them according to their strength and the consequences they determine. We have idle myths (myths for their own sake), existential myths (or cosmogonies, which explain the origins and through their secret force bring forth life), technological myths (a subcategory of the latter, for example the myth of the invention of fire), and providential myths (more than cosmogonies, they guarantee
the salvation of future life). But, she underlines, the function of a myth is practical: “it begins to signify something from the moment in which it is danced or told; only in this way the primordial fact goes into action: the primitive man...doesn't create but reproduces, doesn't improvise but acts following the sacred tradition.....every myth is charged with past, and pregnant of future.”

It follows that we can also distinguish two more categories for myths: acted myths and recited myths. The former are played in dancing, where dancing is not for the divinity but “dancing the divinity,” expressing her/him, manifesting and pulling her/him down from his/her time. As for the place, it can be recreated only through the re-enacting of the mythic time and not vice versa. The latter are scrupulously told by heart, because “the mythic page is not written, but fixed in the memory of the holders of the religious tradition, who don't modify even a comma, for the text is sacred and nothing can modify it until it is believed, until we trust in it.” All this enactment is the ritual itself, which “witnesses the strict link between the components of each religion; sacred history and sacred action; myth and ritual.”

These were the thoughts while we students were marching in the streets, during the boiling years of the rebellion of the Movimento Studentesco, and on one occasion she was personally invested in the protest, during an occupation of the University. She continued on in her research in complete isolation; at that time, the philosophical belief systems that informed the rising feminist groups arose from a vastly different perspective and place than Marconi’s work.

And still today, strangled between Catholicism and market rules, her books are out of print, with the exception of a recently published collection of her essays, edited by Anna De Nardis, which has borrowed its title from the above-quoted essay Da Circe a Morgana (From Kirke to Morgana). This notwithstanding, for women on the path of rediscovering their spiritual and historical roots, Marconi is becoming one of the beloved Mother Ancestors, from whose research we can draw a passionate and forgotten knowledge to enrich and deepen our process of re-membering.

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Marconi, Momolina, “Can the Cosmogony of the Greek be reconstructed?”, in History of Religions 1, 2 (1962), pp. 274-280.


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2 Introduction to *Riflessi Mediterranei nella più antica Religione Laziale*, G. Principato, Milano, 1939, p. 11.
3 The genealogy of Kirke, as always happens when a matrilinear genealogy is forced into a patriarchal one, is multiple: daughter of Hecate (Hes. *Theogonia*) and Helios, or of Perseide and Helios, or, following another source (Hes. *Argon*. Orph.) of Asterope – another Oceanine Nymph – and Hyperion. If daughter of Helios, she is not only Medea’s sister but also of Pasiphae’s and Aietes’. In both cases, she has been generated by the ocean and by the sky.
5 Ibidem, p.70.
8 Ibidem.
16 Introduction to *Riflessi Mediterranei nella più antica Religione Laziale*, p. 10-12.
18 All the quotes in this paragraph are from “Le spose di Zeus nella Teogonia di Esiodo”, reprint in Anna De Nardis ed., *Da Circe a Morgana. Scritti di Momolina Marconi*, pp. 22-56.