

Section 1 – The Foragers

What Makes Us Human

Choosing to Create Life

Imagine: a woman decided, possibly after consultation with her elders or the shaman, that it was time to create a new life. This was a decision of huge significance that would lead her to pass through the dangerous and painful act of childbirth. She might not survive: death in childbirth, up to the advent of modern medicine, was a risk every mother took whenever she became pregnant. It was not something to be undertaken lightly.

Perhaps she adorned herself a little more than usual with beads and trinkets, dressed her hair and coloured her skin and eyes, perhaps with henna or another root, or with coloured earth.¹ Perhaps she did this before a pool of water or perhaps the women joined together to help make each other beautiful. These extra preparations would send a signal to the men of the tribe. Her confident beauty and her enhanced charms would attract them to her.

When she chose her partner, the couple may have retired somewhere to consummate their love. Perhaps they would have remained together as long as it took for the woman to become pregnant, or perhaps she would have taken many lovers, taking pleasure in the power that her sexuality gave her. When she realised that her menstrual flow had stopped, she would return to the sisterhood of mothers, who might in the meantime have been caring for her other children.

As the woman aged, her knowledge and wisdom increased. Almost certainly, she knew the sadness of the death of a child. She had seen the elderly in the tribe pass into the dark and die. She knew the pleasure of suckling a child at her breast, as well as the pain of birth, and the relief and joy at passing through the ordeal of parturition. She knew what it was to have authority, to discipline her children when they disobeyed her or did something dangerous. And she knew and enjoyed her sexuality, aware that she was desired because of the way the men's eyes hotly followed her, the flickering firelight making her skin glow and her eyes sparkle. She knew she had that power and could amuse herself teasing the men, playing the coquette. And she knew the power of choice, when she had taken the hand of the man with whom she would make life.

She was the Goddess, at once Maiden, Mother and Crone. She was beautiful and desirable, loving and nurturing, stern and strict, capable of jealousy and anger, yet also of compassion and forgiveness. She was clever: clever in her mind and with her hands. She could weave and make

¹ In surviving hunter-gatherer cultures, women do this. Ornamenting oneself is an ancient human trait.

baskets and clothes. She could stitch and sew, and she could draw and paint. She could make fire, and she could cook. She could make herself and the world about her beautiful. She had knowledge: knowledge of plants and herbs, infusions and potions, medicine and healing, and knowledge of pain, too. She knew that her sex was a sacred, magical thing that gave her both pleasure and power.