

SUMMONED BY INANNA, QUEEN OF HEAVEN AND EARTH

by Kerri Ryan MA

At the beginning of 2008 I heard the call from the Queen of Heaven to come and journey with her. As a newly initiated priestess having spent one year and one month studying priestess lore, I embarked upon my second year of training and was asked to choose a Goddess to journey with for the coming year. At this stage I knew very little of Inanna, only that this ancient Mesopotamian Goddess was associated with a descent into the underworld and that her temples celebrated the sacred whore. As my academic studies were to incorporate research on the sacred prostitute, I thought who better to guide my journey than the most famous of them all.

Those of you familiar with Inanna, will know her rich mythology supports an underworld journey that is a metaphor for an excursion into your own dark abyss, walking the black night of your own soul. Was I ready for such a journey? I was counseled to not undertake this lightly and if I was to commit, then I was assured of the support of my own Ninshubur, Inanna's lady-in-waiting who was her steadfast support when the going got rough. And so suitably informed (or so I thought), I began.

But this all sounds so ominous when the many faces of Inanna only reveal the breadth and depth of this ancient deity whose name lived on for millennia in Goddesses such as Ishtar, Isis, Neith, Metis, Astarte and Cybele. As I journeyed with her, so too I studied, and found the academic evidence that fleshed out the story of this most esteemed of Goddesses.

The height of her reign flourished from around 4,000 to 2,000 BCE in the great and powerful civilization of Mesopotamia, known today as Iraq, and included the kingdoms of Sumeria, Akkadia, Assyria and Babylonia. Samuel Noel Kramer the celebrated Sumeriologist, explains that Sumer was the first great urban centre to emerge, and with it, the cuneiform or wedge shaped system of writing on clay tablets that was Sumer's greatest gift to modern civilisation.

The archaeological evidence of some 10,000 unearthed clay tablets brings to life the public rites and rituals that dominated Sumerian religious practices. Central to this matriarchal religious cult was the highly venerated Goddess Inanna. She was Queen of Heaven, Goddess of gentle rains and terrible floods, Goddess of the morning and evening star, Queen of the land and its fertility, bestowing kingship on chosen mortals. She was the Goddess of war and equally passionately, the Goddess of sexual love. Far more extroverted than Aphrodite, Inanna celebrated her vulva and the sex act and below is one of the most quoted hymns of the bridal songs, where Inanna calls out to her lover the shepherd King Dumuzi:[1]

My vulva, the horn,

The Boat of Heaven,

Is full of eagerness like the young moon.

My untilled land lies fallow.

As for me, Inanna,

Who will plow my vulva?

Who will plow my high field?
Who will plow my wet ground?
As for me, the young woman,
Who will plow my vulva?
Who will station the ox there?
Who will plow my vulva?

This hymn explain the openness of sexuality expressed in the writings of the Goddess and paints a picture of how liberally sexuality was viewed. Inanna's vulva is often called the "holy lap" and is used as an adjective that is applied to numerous other deities, temples, places and artefacts and is usually translated as "pure" or "holy". Inanna was said to have used her vulva and the power associated with it, to further the prestige and divine status of her city. This accounts for the myriad figurines and terracotta models of female nudes and vulva-shaped ceremonial offerings that have been found all over the ancient near East representing the holy power of sexuality[2]

But it was the highly trained priestesses who became the vessel for the Goddess in the holy sexual rituals performed in her name. The Sumerian and Babylonian temple records indicate that the Qadishtu who served in the temples of Inanna/Ishtar were often from wealthy families. They owned property and land and engaged in extensive business activities. Although the title of Qadishtu translates literally as "sacred woman" or "the undefiled", academic translations have nearly always used the term "prostitute" to describe these women and the term "temple prostitution" to depict the sacred acts of worship that occurred.[3] In later patriarchal times these women are the reviled whores of Babylon referred to in the Old Testament

As stated earlier, Inanna has many bows to her quiver and in another myth, she acquires from the god, Enki, 'The Me' which are the holy laws of heaven and earth and which she presents to her city of Uruk and ultimately gifts to all humankind. The Me are the attributes of civilization, a set of universal and indisputable rules which must be observed by man and god alike. The Me include kingship, priesthood, truth, garments, weapons, art of love making, speech, music and song, power and treachery, deceit, travel, kindness, writing, attention, fear, dismay, judgment, decision-making, allure, and the art of women. In effect Inanna truly earned her Queenship and protectorship of her city.

But it is her descent into the underworld for which she is most commonly known and which metaphor represents the ultimate spiritual initiation. She is called to visit her sister Ereshkigal Queen of the Underworld and in the process, must pass through seven gates where she lets go of each possession and characteristic which feeds the ego, and ends up hanging on a nail as a rotting corpse in the bowels of the underworld. But then, after acknowledging her shadow side, she is rescued by her faithful Ninshubur and ascends back to Earth and thereafter acts as the complete and fully-formed Goddess that she always was.

You don't journey with Inanna unless you are prepared to bare your soul and investigate the most dark recesses that honestly, you aren't even aware exist. I was fortunate enough to have a relationship with Inanna whereby I channeled her conversations with me. Right from the very beginning she tells me that I was called by her, not the other way around, and about the middle of 2008, I found myself in my own personal hell, totally overwhelmed with work, study and priestessing commitments, and suddenly taking antidepressants for the first

time in my life. At this very dark time I sat and connected with her. Below is part of her conversation with me:

Priestess, and I do say priestess, for you are undergoing and you are enduring and you are finding your women's soul. To know the depths of what it feels like to weep and to have your heart rent, through forgetting your connection and living in hatred of your body and your self is indeed the deep dark abyss. You have been journeying dear one and you had to leave behind your connection with me to do so. To be cut off and disparate from your source is indeed the journey into the darkness. You can't take me with you, for you travel alone. And so your days of less and less connection with me signal the descent. You were unaware of your disconnection and that is also a sign that you had lost your way. You had to sever the chord so that you could find yourself lost and alone and angry and filled with hatred. It is then and only then that you find yourself in the blackness. But you did not tarry long. Filled with anguish and pressure from outside work requirements, you add all these commitments to your life and make them the focus of overwhelm that you see before you and it all adds to the cauldron - a pinch of bitterness, a twist of anguish a drop of caustic. Then you stir and you find yourself drinking the brew that comes from your own black heart.

The bone mother calls you and you find yourself enraged in a place where it is safe to release. She says come into my cauldron and find a place where the rage is alright, where the outlet is safe to express, where your fellow women support and offer love to you, where you can let go and rage against the injustices that fill your life, the loneliness of this journey for you. For while you have been travelling these last few weeks, her energies have been influencing you. Without even knowing, the High priestess weaves her spell and as sorceress, she pulls the strings that lead you to the brink and then pushes you over. It is all in order. It is all in perfect timing. See how you came together as women who were ready to spill, to break, to rage and anger. In a safe place you dug to the bottom of the abyss and in support of each other, you found your way back to the surface.

My journey as a priestess supports the growth of my soul and I undertake the work willingly and passionately. The High Priestess of my Order was my Ninshubur and she spiritually and physically supported me by taking on some of my workload to get me through and my fellow priestesses in training provided a support network that allowed me to be who I really am – all faults and shortcomings liberally displayed. But to descend into the dark and lose yourself to the light is part of the cycle of the dark mother where we must die to ourselves so that we may be reborn again, stronger and much healed.

Do not fear when Inanna calls you to put your ear to the great below, just journey with awareness and the support of your own Ninshubur.

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[1] Wolkstein & Kramer 1983:37

[2] Leick 1994

[3] Stone 1979

