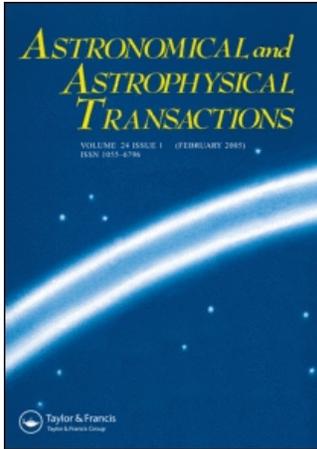


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Astronomical & Astrophysical Transactions

The Journal of the Eurasian Astronomical Society

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713453505>

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Online Publication Date: 01 January 1999

To cite this Article: Kosarev, M. F. (1999) 'The system of the universe in pagan siberian indigenous peoples', *Astronomical & Astrophysical Transactions*, 17:6, 449 -

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To link to this article: DOI: 10.1080/10556799908244108

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10556799908244108>

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THE SYSTEM OF THE UNIVERSE IN PAGAN SIBERIAN INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

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(Received August 12, 1997)

Impartial analysing of evidence discussed suggests that ancient pagan world outlook passed ahead of actual knowledge of those times in respect to the depth of understanding mysteries of the Universe. Major manifestations of paganism can be understood on the basis of modern scientific level, partly unknown yet, but not from the so-called primitive-logic point of view.

KEY WORDS Universe, paganism, indigenous peoples, shaman, priest, wizard, upper world, middle world, lower world, world outlook

In the view of Siberian pagans-shamanists the Universe is multistructural and multidimensional. It is comprehended in two main projections – vertical and horizontal, which quite often appear in a “mixed” way, forming a single structure.

The vertical model represented by a “universe tree” more often, which is known under the name of “shamanic tree” as its Ural-Siberian variant. Its invisible (root) part symbolises the lower world, the visible part is the middle and the top part associates with the upper (celestial) sphere. In Yakut tales the image of the Universe is described as growing on a hill. The tree was “large leafy with strong sweet-scented trunk, patterned leaves, silver bark, never fading. . . The top of this tree germinated through seven layers of sky and the roots stretched into the Underworld” (Khudiakov, 1890).

The link: settlement – cemetery – sanctuary most clearly expresses a horizontal view of the Universe. In this system a settlement is understood as the middle world, the cemetery as the lower world and the sanctuary as the upper world. Each part of the link (settlement – cemetery – sanctuary) by itself appears as a model of the world and at the same time it includes smaller internal structures: a house as a part of a settlement, a grave as a part of a cemetery. In accordance with the principle of three spheres inherent to all levels of the Universe they are also perceived as comprising three parts.

The “mixed” (vertical and horizontal) model appeared the most figuratively in the mythical “shamanic river”. By this river shaman moves into different spaces of the Universe. This river flows east to west or south to north (horizontal projection); the riverhead is in the upper world, the lower reaches are in the lower world (vertical

projection). A shaman travelling into the upper world swims up the “shamanic river”; and departing into the lower world he swims downstream, thus the drum is comprehended as a boat and a beetle as an oar.

The upper and the lower worlds also have a number of floors. For example, Khanty and Manai divide the upper world into three levels and the lower world into three, one under another. At the same time a tendency to replace three levels on seven was observed among them but it was never realized up to the end. Northern Samoyedians considered the upper and lower worlds as a structure of seven levels: Nga, the central deity of Anets, lives on the seventh sky and the Todote, the lord of evil spirits, inhabits the lower world under seven layers of permafrost and sends illness and death on the earth.

Among ethnic groups of South Siberia the division of worlds into levels was even more complex. Inhabitants of Altai consider that the upper and lower worlds consist of nine levels. Altaian shaman praying to the central goddess Ul'gen placed a birch in yurt. The top of the tree came out through a flue. Boughs were lopped off and nine notches (steps) were made on the stem. Ecstatic shaman jumped on the notches one by one making comments that it was the consecutive overcoming of the sky levels.

Usually scholars consider the levels of the upper and lower worlds as hierarchical stepped pyramid conforming to the social grade of terrestrial society. For pagan ethnic groups the complication of public structure results in an increasing quantity of floors in the upper and lower worlds. Nevertheless this point of view seems to be simplified, though the author of the essay adhered to it. According to the available ethnographic data, the levelled structure of the words in paganism is not a direct reflection of the structure of terrestrial society and it has no pronounced social load, anyhow, in societies which retain prehistoric features.

In addition there is no direct correlation between the growth of the number of levels and the further complication of the religious and world outlook complex, as one may suppose. So the majority of Tungus language speaking groups divides the upper world into three levels, while the northern Samoyedians (Nenets, Anets, Nganasans) divide it into seven, though the cosmological concept of Tungus (Evenk) is more complicated in its context.

In our view, each particular Siberian ethnic group had a more dynamic division of the world into levels than was previously accepted. It could change the number according to different ritual situations. Nganasans, hunters of reindeer inhabiting the tundra, divided the upper world into seven skies, but their shaman during the ceremony visited nine celestial levels. In some cases Selkups divided the upper world into three floors, as well as into seven or nine in other circumstances. Teleuts believed that the upper world consists of nine floors but their shaman called the helping spirits of twelve sides and sometimes applied to “higher assistants”, up to the spirit inhabiting “the sixteenth sky” (Direnkova, 1949).

The potential readiness to exist on new levels and sublevels, outside the known worlds, was allowed. Evenks-orochens believed that the upper and lower worlds have three main levels but their shaman wear on the breast part of their ritual cloak rounded plaques without any depictions; these plates symbolized the unknown levels

of the Universe. Tuvan shamans had their own secret "shamanic" lands ("dajyin deer", "tajga tandj"), which did not fit into the three-level structure of the Universe. They are interconnected and situated somewhere between the middle and upper worlds, and have a positive influence on the earth and people.

Siberian pagan aboriginal peoples consider a tree, a person, a river, a house, a settlement, a grave, a cemetery, a sanctuary, a vessel, a shaman drum, etc., to be microworlds and microuniverses. Every separated structural block of the Universe from macro- to micro- contains its own three spheres. So the lower world has its own bottom and upper parts, the upper world includes the upper, middle and bottom parts and its inhabitants have appropriate differences in their status.

However on the level of substructures and microstructures this internal division into three parts seems to be less pronounced than in the above mentioned three-part models of the Universe and consequently cannot always be revealed externally. Nevertheless the Yakuts and some Altai-Sayanian Turkic language speaking ethnic groups have a reasonably clear and distinct internal structural organisation of sublevels. So according to Yakut ideas in the upper world not only light spirits ("aiyyi") but evil spirits ("abaacyi") live as well.

N. A. Alexeev rightly supposed that for peoples of Altai, the lord of the upper world Ul'gen and the lord of the lower world Erlik *regulate* the dynamics of good and evil according to the requirements of the existing organization of the world, rather than *incamate* them. N. A. Alexeev notes that Ul'gen can be good to people as well as to deny assistance, and it was in Erlik power to do much harm to people or not to do it. This means that Ul'gen and Erlik do not create good and evil, but control them. They could be both helpful as well as bad for people (Alexeev, 1984).

According to Siberian pagan mythology, in olden days lords of the upper and lower worlds shared ideas. Then after some disagreements and misunderstanding, caused by different interpretations of the objects of creation and the character of the world organization, they divided the spheres of influence and parted to opposite corners of the Universe, previously reaching the agreement to live in harmony. Since then, the lords of the upper and lower worlds perform different duties of equal honour and responsibility, for different spaces of the Universe. According to the ideas of pagans, the lord of the Underworld is a diligent and zealous chief of the entrusted bottom sphere of the Universe, who lives according to the logic of the inner side of the Universe, looking after his people, seeking to expand his possessions (certainly at the expense of the middle world), fairly carrying out his part of the continuous round of life.

For Siberian pagans the lower world is not "Hades", where the soul of a dead person suffers tortures of the damned forever, but it is a temporary posthumous refuge for the next "ripening" of the dark human substation, which is a condition for future revival.

In contrast to Zoroastrism, Christianity, Judaism and Islam, paganism never aims to eradicate evils, considering it to be as lawful as good. Siberian aboriginal people believe that from birth a person has two main vital substations – light (bird-soul) and dark (shadow-soul). Illness and death come when they (or one of them) leave a person and part to opposite corners (the bright soul goes upwards, and

the dark one downwards). That is, a person, as well as all other structures of the world, can normally exist only with internal equilibrium conditions of light and dark beginnings. Good cannot exist without evil, birth without death, top without bottom, light without dark. The existence of anyone is possible only under dual oppositions, unity of opposites.

It is well to bear in mind another correlation of opposite spheres of the Universe: the possibility of interreplacement and interchanging. According to the ideas of pagans the top may transform into the bottom and the bottom may become the top under certain conditions; a birth may turn into death and the other way round, etc. This gives rise to the magical act of "turning over", widespread not only in Siberian paganism.

The Yakuts crucified a murderer on a tree "head first, head over heels on the end of the western sky" and it was one of the most severe punishments (Kochnev, 1899). They believed that it was a guarantee of his turning into the darkest heart of the Underworld. Northern Buryats used to cremate their deceased on the top of the hills or mountains, but they buried evil-doing "black" shamans alive head down (Klemenč and Khangalov, 1910). There are interesting examples of spatial turning over in Slav-Russian beliefs. For transformation into another "dark" being one had to come down to a cellar and turn over his head there; this found reflection in the Russian name for a wizard-transformer (oboroten – the turnskin).

Turning anyone back to front played a similar role. Punishing an offender, Turkic-Mongolian cattle-breeders put him facing the tail on a black bull, or on a black cow, which was even more disgraceful. The use of an invisible hat is based on the same "inverse" principle. If one put it on correctly there is no effect at all. If one put it back to front, the person becomes invisible as if disappearing from ordinary space.

Besides "turning over" and "turning round back to front", it was possible to make spatial changes by "turning inside out". Different peoples, including Slavs, believed that turning out of clothes may help a person when a wood-goblin twisted his way.

Kamchadals (Itelmen) considered the earth to be the "seamy side" of the lower world first floor (Orlova, 1975). Slavs considered the underground sphere to be the inner side of the ground sphere; this gave the name to the Underworld – "preispodnja". In connection with this we recall the well-known anecdote about Khodja Nasreddin who described a mountain as a hole "turned inside out". This thoughtful definition may be extended on the pagan comprehension of the lower and upper worlds. The lower world is the upper world turned inside out (and vice versa).

In Siberian paganism the vertical and horizontal models of the Universe often appear as structurally and semantically identical categories. For example, Khanty in their ritual terminology had the identical name "il" for "north" and "bottom", and "nom" for "south" and "top". Among the terms for upper world in the Evenk language there are "tjimanitky" (literally, toward morning, i.e. to the west) and "dolbonitky" (literally, toward night, i.e. to the west) (Kulemzin, 1984; Anisimov, 1959).

Here we should clarify one discrepancy. It is agreed that the orientation of the deceased in the grave should correspond to a line of horizontal mutual arrangement

of the upper and lower worlds (south–north, or east–west). Nevertheless a strictly northern as well as a strictly western orientation of the deceased in ancient Siberian cemeteries is seldom seen, which seems to be in contradiction with the conception of a northern (or western) location of the lower world and the country of the dead as well.

But this contradiction may be perceived to be more apparent than real. For example, Khanty used to place the deceased facing north (the shadow-soul would see the way), or with their feet-facing north (the shadow-soul would follow the proper direction), or their feet to a river (the shadow-soul would pass to a river bank and go downstream). All three variants illustrate the concept of northern orientation, despite the fact that the direction of the body in a grave may differ from the meridional line. Known in Siberian ethnography, the position of the deceased face down or head down is also a variant of the northern orientation.

The ancient understanding of the west is at variance with contemporary logic as well. In pagan ritual activities the sunset is considered as the west. This was discussed in archaeological and ethnographic papers, for example by ethnologist A. V. Shevchenko. But the summer and winter sunset is spaced up to 75° on the horizon, so the direction of the sunset and the west are in line only twice a year, on the vernal and autumnal equinoxes. The “fan-shaped” character of pagan ritual orientation should be taken property into account in the semantic interpretation of archaeoastronomical objects, as they are called, and particularly of burial complexes, sacrificial places and sanctuaries. It should be remembered that in parallel with the horizontal, the vertical orientation was widely used in ordinary pagan ritual practice. So sacrifices offered to deities of the upper world were often put on a tree or other high place, and offerings to the goddess of the lower world were buried.

From the above discussion it follows that the Universe in Siberian paganism included a complicated system of marginal, concentric and intercrossed vertical and horizontal spatial structures with multistep dynamic subordination. It is practically impossible to comprehend it with the background of our present notion of the material world (Figure 1).

Only a shaman can orient himself in this complicated system of spatial relationships. He offers meditation and understanding of the interconnection mechanism between different parts of the Universe; that is why he can be a qualified and competent intermediary between our world and other worlds. A shaman is a guard of the world structure, the continuous round of life and death, of the equilibrium condition of good and evil of the entrusted part of the middle world (Figure 2). In all this he is opposite to the trickster who shakes the equilibrium condition of good and evil on the earth, who is an antagonist of traditional knowledge and a disturber of generally accepted social, cultural and moral norms.

In response to our contention that the Siberian shaman is connected with the upper world as well as with the lower world, one may argue that there are “white” and “black” shamans. “White” shamans deal only with the upper world; “black” shamans associate only with the lower world. This is perfectly true. But the point is that the division of shamans into “white” and “black” marks the start of the

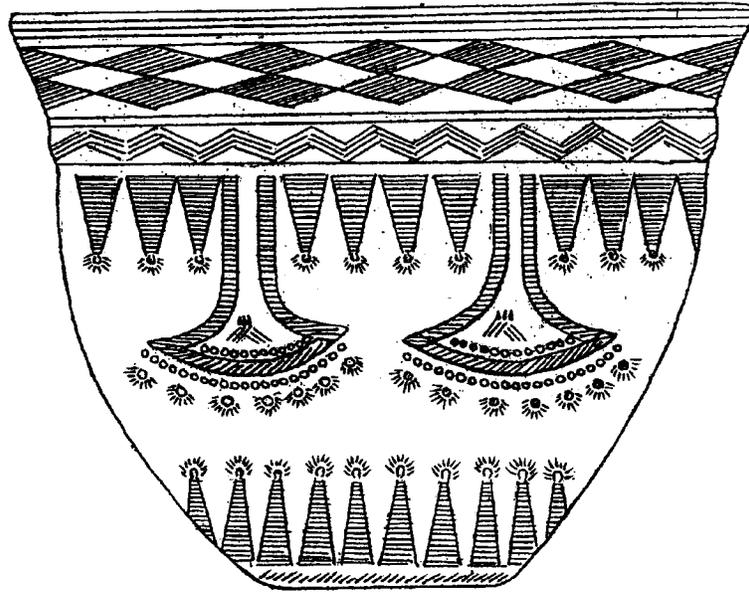


Figure 1 Clay vessel depicting the Universe (graphic reconstruction): about 15th century BC Bulanbash settlement, Chelyabinsk. oblast. Abashev culture. Southern Urals variant.

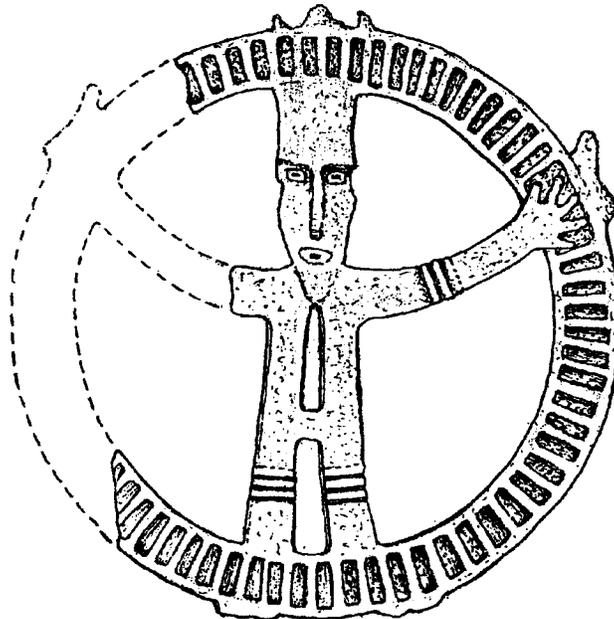


Figure 2 Shaman in the system of the Universe. Cult bronze casting. About 5th century BC Napas river, Tomsk oblast. Kulai culture.

dying off of shamanism and shamans, their future collapse. We may interpret the appearance of “white” and “black” shamans among some Siberian peoples, mainly Turkic and Mongolian speaking cattle-breeders, as a symptom of their readiness for acceptance of so-called world religions. In most of them[†] the idea of uncompromising struggle of light and dark becomes the main moral principle, and the idea that good finally gains the victory over evil proclaims to be the main aim.

The “white” shaman is no longer a shaman but a *priest*; the “black” shaman is nothing but a *wizard*. Reckoning both of them in the category of shamans results from an inexact use of terms.

For ordinary Siberian pagans the schematic and generalized structure of the whole Universe without enclosed small spaces was simple and logical. For them the upper world is the world of light powers, the lower world is one of dark powers and the middle world is the intermediate sphere of the Universe. Light and dark are mixed in the middle world as well as everything which they symbolize.

According to this structural scheme the Universe is stable while light and dark are in dynamic balance in the middle world. Then this balance is upset, the darkness expanding wider, and finally the Earth turns out to be attracted by the bottom part of the Universe, and they merge together in a single dark unit. The inhabitants of the earth apprehend this event as “the end of the world”. It is the termination of the middle world and only two opposite spheres of the universe remain – the upper and the lower.

If the balance in the middle world is disturbed for the benefit of light powers, the middle part of the Universe is attracted to the upper part more and more, and finally they merge into a united light world. Inhabitants of the Earth apprehend this “lifting” as the establishment of “Paradise on Earth”. The middle world disappears again and then only two opposite spheres of the Universe, the upper and the lower, gain strength without the intermediate (terrestrial) sphere.

It is also possible (as a third variant) that the middle world under extreme universal circumstances “attracts” the upper and the lower worlds and universal chaos is established. In all three variants the result depends on the conditions of the middle world. The logic of development of the Universe, its declines and revivals, depend on it.

In the pagan variant these rises and declines have a cyclic character. In the biblical concept of the Universe this cyclic character is denied in essence. The middle (terrestrial) world starts from Eden, from paradise and coming through some disturbing periods, it returns to paradise, preserved in these conditions.

If one compares these two cosmogonical versions with modern scientific theories of world origin he will see a general conformity of the pagan concept to the theory of a “pulsating Universe” and the “biblical” concept of the “Big Bang” theory.

In contrast to “non pagan” religions, in which faith is usually put above knowledge, in paganism faith and knowledge are at least equal in rights, and the latter sometimes acts “almost at a scientific” level. And here we meet many puzzling occurrences; here is one of them: comprehending the pagan country of the dead

[†]We mean Zoroastrism, Christianity and Islam.

(usually located on one of the lower levels of the lower world) with the background of present-day cosmophysical knowledge, one may evaluate it as a classical example of the antiworld.

The country of the dead is a copy of the middle (terrestrial) world; it is not a direct copy but a mirror reflection. Right and left switch places. Therefore the clothes of the deceased was in accordance with the mode of the lower, not the terrestrial world. For example, Selcups preparing the deceased in his last way, put the left mitten on his right hand and the right mitten on the left, and the same for footwear. They also used to button up clothes on the opposite side.

When a living person by chance finds himself in the country of the dead, inhabitants of the lower world cannot see and hear him. The same is true for the inhabitant of the lower world on the earth. People except ecstatic or sleeping shaman cannot see and hear him. The appearance of a lower world inhabitant on the earth is manifested only by indirect indications: an special crackle in the hearth; dogs start barking and catch something invisible by their fangs and claws.

If inhabitants of the two worlds come in to physical contact, a catastrophe happens in the place where the interference from the other world of death has taken place. More often it is epidemic or pestilence, but sometimes there appears something special, i.e. essentially the something happens as resulting from the collision between a particle and an antiparticle: "annihilation" and appearance of a new quality. One Nganasan legend tells about a woman from the lower world who came to the vital (terrestrial) world and her kiss made all her relatives dead. (*Mythologicheskie skazky...*, 1976).

Birth may turn into death and death into birth by contacts between the vital and dead worlds. It should be mentioned that according to the ideas of Siberian indigenous people (at least West Siberian) dead inhabitants of the lower world consider themselves alive. They comprehend people of the middle world to be dead and are afraid of us as much as we are afraid of them.

The depth and versatility of the pagan understanding of the world are striking. In myths and tales of different peoples (not only Siberian) the following episode is described: a hero traveling in an unknown (unterrestrial?) place, spent a day or a night there and returning to his village found no home, no relatives, no friends. During the day of his absence, three hundred or thousand years had passed in his native world. This world became strange, nobody remembered the hero and nobody needed him.

In the upper world, time may act as if it stops; a moment and eternity are in essence the same. In the lower world time moves backwards, from future to past. In Khanty and Mansi beliefs, the moment of the appearance of the shadow-soul in the country of death marks the birth of a new inhabitant of the lower world; he is not in his babyhood but so old that he was dying on the earth, i.e. reaching the lower world shadow as if returning to another life. And then life starts the opposite way. The "shadow" becomes younger and younger. Reaching babyhood it continues to decrease and finally disappears from the lower space. This disappearance in some (not exactly clear) way determines birth of a new child on the earth in the family or kin of the deceased. Simultaneously from the upper

world the bird-soul returns to the earth (it need not be personal, but any one of the dead kinsmen) and a new-born receives his soul. It is the starting of a new cycle of terrestrial life, and it may continue the same way through many generation in succession.

Returning to the next terrestrial life, the baby at once forgets all his previous lives. But sometimes they remain in his memory. It may become apparent when a child, for example, who cannot yet speak fluently, starts to say strange words, demonstrating his acquaintance with events of past time. It is considered to be a bad omen and parents, or shaman made some magic acts aiming to erase reincarnational memories. According to L. Y. Shternberg, in such cases Nivhs acted in the following manner. When a child started "to speak, cleverly, his father put on him a hat back to front and started to ask about the past, then silently tell him: "It is enough, lets forget about the past". Then he put the hat on correctly. In that case the boy forgets everything and lives a long life. If the father does not do this, the boy will die soon" (Shternberg, 1933).

In contrast to common people, the shaman's reincarnational memory was "safe" and wider. So, the Yakuts shaman Aadga (Nurbinski ulus, Tarkai nasleg) not only remembered his previous life, but also knew his future posthumous fate. "At first, I had been a Tungus shaman, but once looking for a lost reindeer had run upon palma (bear-spear – M.K.) and had died, and then was born again among Yakuts. At the back of my body ... there is a place not covered with skin. It is the trace of the wound which I had received in the previous life. After death I must revive again among people who have sledge-dogs" (Ksenofontov, 1930). It is interesting that according to a more detailed version, in his previous life (among the Solon Tungus) Aadga was a woman named Kisiltai-Udagan, having shaman possession (ibid, 81).

Pagan understanding of space is also complex. We already mentioned this in connection with the attempt to show the grades of the system of spheres in the pagan structure of the Universe. So, one folklore plot popular among different peoples of our planet tells about a hero's preparations for a journey to unterrestrial countries. The hero of the myth or tale "compresses" his possessions including house, herds, etc. so that can place them into a small traveling bag or a small chest. Arriving he "expands" them up to normal size, as if demonstrating that in a certain system of the interrelations of space and time macroworld may be perceived as microworld and vice versa.

As far as spatio-temporal relationships in the pagan view of the world are concerned, the lower world is associated with the past, the middle world with the present and the upper world with the future, as can be judged by Ural-Siberian archaeological and ethnographic materials. This idea has not taken definite conceptual shape, especially because of the fact that mythological logic allows the joining and interchanging of present, past and future depending on the real and imaginary location of the "viewer" in the system of the Universe.

It is also difficult to interpret shaman rituals and the person of shaman. A shaman has unique psychophysical abilities. He can separate his soul and body, to direct his soul to other worlds and times; he possesses teleportation; he can be

in two places at the same time; he can deal with his genetic memory as well as with skills and knowledge of his ancestors. When in ecstasy Chukchi shaman can be in contact with inhabitants of uninterrestrial worlds, speak with them in a language unknown to his kinsfolk. The Yakuts shaman does the same. Returning from the lower world he is trembling with cold and asks to kindle the fire, thus in his speech one can hear some "uninterrestrial" words and accents.

It is likely that some of these enigmas result from clever juggling and gifted playing. Nevertheless impartial analysis of the evidence suggests the idea that the ancient pagan world outlook passed ahead of the actual knowledge of those times with respect to the depth of understanding of Universal mysteries. If this is so, many principal manifestations of paganism can be understood on the basis of the modern scientific level, partly yet unknown but not from a so-called primitive logic point of view (to a considerable extent thought of by ourselves).

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