

---

## Response to Sam Gill's Article 'What is Mother Earth? A Name, A Meme, A Conspiracy'

---

Olle Sundström

Dept. of Historical, Philosophical and Religious Studies  
Umeå University, 901 87 Umeå, Sweden  
olle.sundstrom@umu.se

Ever since the publication of *Mother Earth: An American Story* in 1987, Sam Gill's study of the origin and function of Mother Earth has been, for some, highly controversial. Some thirty-five years later I have been invited to comment on Gill's most recent Mother Earth analysis. However, perhaps to the disappointment of some readers, I do not have any major objections to Gill's evidence and reasoning.

Although I am no expert on the historical cultures of indigenous peoples of the Americas or Australia, nor on the source material needed for knowledge about them, I find convincing his critical reading of the Mother Earth story. His method is sound—to listen carefully to what the source material actually tells us, considering basic source-critical issues—and his conclusions appear to be plausible and reliable.

Gill reminds us of the importance of placing our data in their exact historical context, and not to project our findings back into an imagined past. For those of us who are engaged in comparative research an equally important lesson from his investigation of Mother Earth is to be cautious not to project traits from one member (say, *Pachamama*) of a chosen category or type (say, a fertility goddess) to another (say, *Asdzáá Naadleehi* or Changing Woman). Such projections not only simplify ethnographic data (which at times can be tolerated by making complex material more accessible, in other words, for pedagogical reasons), but they can also distort such data.

There are many examples of the kind of projections mentioned above leading to a reification and oversimplification of comparative concepts. Often these concepts were concocted by Europeans, usually as an attempt to understand and interpret, but sometimes also to denigrate or honor (romanticize) a certain cultural expression. Gradually they have taken on a life of their own and become living realities 'out

there', in the fields that we study. Concepts such as, for example, 'god' and 'religion' may have a longer history and have therefore become more naturalized in most languages and cultures around the globe, but their histories are similar to that of 'Mother Earth'. Already in the fifth century BCE, for example, the Greek historian Herodotus used the word *theoi*, 'gods', in his descriptions of foreign peoples' worldviews, thus creating a comparative category for (what he saw as) a certain kind of being, modelled on an ancient Greek prototype. Subsequently, *theos* (sing.) and *theoi* were used in Greek translations of the Hebrew Bible, as well as in the New Testament, for *YHVH*'ēl/ēlōah/ēlōhīm and for the condemned 'other gods' (Hebr. 'ēlōhīm 'āhērīm, Greek *theoi heteroi*). When the Roman empire, and at a later stage also Christianity, spread across northern and western Europe, the Latin *deus/dei* (cognate to Greek *theos/theoi*) were rendered *god/gods* (and cognates) in the Germanic languages.

As we all know the category 'gods' nowadays occurs both as a vernacular and an academic concept, used for explicit and implicit comparisons. It is used for a variety of visible and invisible beings in quite different ideological, cultural, and historical settings. And it is unclear what properties—or even property in the singular—all these gods share or shared in their indigenous contexts. With the creation of the current comparative category 'gods', properties may be projected from one member of the category to another. Calling, for example, *Afrodite*, *Amaterasu*, *Isis*, *Óðinn*, and *YHVH* gods make us assume common traits among them. The category may still be theoretically justified with, for example, family resemblance and prototype theory as a loose, interpretative concept. Even if all these so-called gods do not share any one common property, they can be meaningfully comparable from a certain perspective. The important thing is then to account for the paradigm within which the category is granted meaning and motivate why the obvious differences among the 'gods' can be seen as secondary (as I have argued elsewhere, see Sundström 2008: 29–73 and Sundström 2022). Gill explains well the paradigms for the birth of 'Mother Earth', in the creative encounter among Native Americans, European-descended colonialists and (post-colonial) environmentalists, who have conspired in the conception of Mother Earth.

Another example of a comparative concept becoming reified and giving rise to a new social phenomenon is 'shaman' (together with 'shamanism'). I have myself traced the origin and development of the concept, and conception, of shaman/shamanism in post-Soviet Siberia, and this story has many resemblances to the story Gill tells of Mother Earth. Originally, in the seventeenth century, the term *shaman* was incorporated into European languages from the Manchu-Tungus

languages of central Siberia, where it was used as a designation for one of the foremost indigenous ritual specialists. In the eighteenth century Russian and German scientists, and also Russian Orthodox missionaries, began to use the term as a cross-cultural concept for prominent ritual specialists among all the peoples of Siberia; and in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the category was further widened and came to include ritual specialists all over the world, and also projected back into an imagined past, disengaged from concrete historical and cultural contexts. The languages and cultures, including worldviews—as well as the ritual specialists—of the indigenous peoples of Siberia were as varied as the languages, cultures, and worldviews in North America at the time. Yet, ‘shaman’ was for the European observers a convenient simplification to brand, for example, a Nenets *tadebya*, a Nganasan *ḡəʹ*, a Khanti *chirta-ku*, a Yakut *oyuun* or *udagan*, a Buryat *böö*, an Altaian *kam* etc. Depending on their interpretive paradigms and assumptions—Christian Orthodox theology, enlightened rationalism, or romanticism—the observers considered the so-called shamans to be either devil worshippers, charlatans or children of nature using extraordinary mental capacities for creative solutions to social and medical problems (see further, Sundström 2012).

During the 1980s and 1990s, with perestroika and the collapse of the Soviet Union, there was a so-called cultural-national renaissance among the various ethnic groups in the multi-national Union. The renaissance was about reawakening the separate ethnic identities and the local traditions that many perceived to have been suppressed under communism. The creation of *homo sovieticus* was interpreted as a disguised Russification among many representatives of non-Russian ethnic groups. Because atheism had been an integral component of Soviet ideology, for many it felt natural to return to its antithesis, religion. In the case of the indigenous peoples of Siberia, in historical and ethnographic literature, their religion had been described and popularized as ‘shamanism’. With the help of these historical-ethnographic sources, combined with reminiscences from the old generation and not least with inspiration from the ‘core shamanism’ created by the American anthropologist Michael Harner, shamans and shamanism arose in Siberia by the end of the twentieth century, not so much as disparate local traditions, but as a single tradition—although varied, like all traditions—spanning all the indigenous peoples of Siberia and connecting them to the growing international indigenous movement (see also Znamenski 2007).

In this perspective, Gill’s use of the concept of meme for the name Mother Earth is apt. The exact meaning of a certain meme is elusive, but it has strong signal value in, for example, identity formation and

political and religious discourse. Gods and religion, shaman and shamanism, function in similar ways as memes.

That Gill does not find in use any significant references to the proper name Mother Earth before the 1970s, neither any decisive similarities among various feminine beings in the historical cosmologies of Native North America (or elsewhere) that would fit a general template—whatever that template would be—for a belief in Mother Earth, depends on his wish to focus on differences and particularities, rather than on similarities and universals. Gill is clearly focused on disproving the historical existence of widespread ideas of a Mother Earth, and of the *name* Mother Earth. However, this does not mean that the proper name Mother Earth is completely missing in ethnographic reports prior to Albrecht Dietrich's *Mutter Erde* and the Romantics of the nineteenth century. Let me suggest two examples from the material that I am familiar with from my own field of research.

During the 1720s, the head of the Lutheran mission of the Danish-Norwegian church to the Sami people (hunters, fishers, and reindeer herders in Northern Scandinavia), Thomas von Westen, compiled information on Sami 'paganism' to report to the College of Missions in Copenhagen (for more on these sources, see Rydving 2010: 57–71). In these sources a South Sami 'goddess' by the name of *Maadteraahka* is described. The word *maadter* means 'origin, root, earth', and *maadtere* is the word for the floor alongside the inner walls of a dwelling or hut (*gåetie* in South Sami). *Aakha* means 'wife; old woman'. In present day South Sami the word *maadteraahka* means 'ancestress; great-grandmother' (see Bäckman 1984: 32). When translating from one language to another, the translator is faced with several options. The name *Maadteraahka* has often been translated 'Urmother', using the German or Scandinavian *Ur-* for 'original'. Another option would be 'Earth old woman'.

Details about *Maadteraahka* are scarce in the sources, but they tell us that she was supposed to be residing in the ground, in the floor of the *gåetie*. One of her functions was to receive the 'souls' of children to be born from male beings in the sky. She created bodies for these souls and handed them over to one of her three daughters, *Saaraahka* (who was compared to the antique Roman goddess *Venus*, by one of the source authors) or *Joeksaahka*, who placed the fetuses in human women's wombs. *Maadteraahka* and her daughters were believed to be involved in procreation, pregnancy, childbirth and the protection of offspring, both human and other animals.

During the 1820s, the Russian Orthodox archimandrite Veniamin led a mission among the Samoyedic-speaking Nenets on the Kanin, Malozemelskaya and Bolshezemelskaya tundras of Northern Russia.

In his description of Nenets beliefs, Veniamin focused on what he interpreted as their main god, *Num'*, in heaven, but he also gave a few pieces of information on 'lower deities', such as the sun, the moon, the stars, the clouds and the earth. According to Veniamin, when a person was ill, the Nenets prayed to *Ya khadakov* ('Earth old woman') to let go of the patient. Furthermore, at the sacred island of Vaygach, there were two main 'idols', on the south side one called *Vesako* ('Old man') and on the north side one called *Khadako* ('Old woman'). The latter was the personification of the earth, to whom sacrifices of reindeer were made to secure good luck, especially with regard to reindeer breeding and hunting (Veniamin 1855: 122–23).

In twentieth-century ethnographies there is certainly more information about the existence of beings with names that could be translated as 'Mother Earth' among Samoyedic-speaking peoples in Siberia. Soviet ethnographers reported *Məu-n'emy* ('Earth mother') among the Nganansan and of *Ya' nebya* ('Earth's mother') among the Nenets. According to the ethnographers, these beings were among the most central figures in the worldviews in question (see e.g., Khomich 1966: 202–204; Dolgikh 1968). However, these ethnographies carry their own specific source critical and theoretical problems (some of which I have discussed in a recent article, see Sundström 2022), not the least pertaining to their dependence on Friedrich Engels's theory of a matriarchate or mother-right in primitive societies.

I am not suggesting that *Maadteraahka* and *Ya khadako* (or *Ya' nebya* and *Məu-n'emy*) were the same or that they should be equated with other beings that were given indigenous names (or appellations) that reasonably can be translated into English as Mother (or Grandmother) Earth. Nor am I saying that the Sami and Nenets ideas of *Maadteraahka* and *Ya khadako* are equivalent to modern ideas of Mother Earth. My point with bringing up the examples from the missionaries of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century is to illustrate that there are examples of the name Mother Earth prior to the Tecumseh and Smohalla stories, and that are quite independent of a romantic image of 'primitive peoples'. Indeed, the previously mentioned Lutheran and Orthodox missionaries were describing what they saw as paganism and devil worship, and one thing they most certainly did not do, was to idealize the worldviews and ritual systems of the indigenous peoples whom they met.

In the short, the early descriptions of the indigenous notions of *Maadteraahka* and *Ya khadakov* that are extant, are not nearly equivalent to conceptions of a global earth, a planet. Most likely, these indigenous peoples conceived of them as personifying the earth at a local place. In the case of *Maadteraahka*, living in the floor of the home, this place was also mobile over the year, since the Sami were nomads. When they

erected a *gâetie* in a new place, *Maadteraahka* and her daughters were there too. Therefore, in translating their names, perhaps 'earth' is less fitting than 'ground', 'land', 'soil', or even 'floor'. (We should keep in mind, of course, that the floor of a South Sami *gâetie* was something very different from the floor of a modern living room.) From the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the Sami and the Nenets—just like almost all peoples around the world—have been caught up in globalization, a process that was accelerated in the twentieth century. This not only expanded these two peoples' horizons from their respective local grounds, but has also set them in contact with other indigenous peoples around the world. As Gill shows, in these global networks a community of indigenous peoples from around the world have taken form, and Mother Earth functions as a personification not only of a local ground, land or floor, but of a global earth. In footnote 7, Gill raises a very interesting question that it would be fruitful to engage in future research, namely, whether the name and idea of Mother Earth might play a significant role also in the present (and presumably future) era of climate change and migration. After all, Mother Earth, in contrast to, for example, God, has an obvious material referent in the earth we all, one way or another, call our home.

### References

- Bäckman, Louise. 1984. 'The Akkas: A Study of Four Goddesses in the Religion of the Saamis (Lapps)', in W. Tyloch (ed.) *Current Progress in the Methodology of the Science of Religions* (Warsaw: Polish Scientific Publishers): 31–39.
- Dolgikh, Boris O. 1968. 'Matriarkhal'nye cherty v verovaniyakh nganasan', in V. P. Alekseev (ed.) *Problemy antropologii i istoricheskoy etnografii Azii* (Moscow: Nauka): 214–29.
- Gill, Sam D. 1987. *Mother Earth: An American Story* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press).
- Khomich, Lyudmila V. 1966. *Nentsy: istoriko-etnograficheskie ocherki* (Moscow: Nauka).
- Rydving, Håkan. 2010. *Tracing Sami Traditions: In Search of the Indigenous Religion Among the Western Sami During the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Centuries* (Oslo: Institute for Comparative Research in Human Culture).
- Sundström, Olle. 2022. '"Spirits" and "Gods" as Comparative Concepts in Soviet Studies of the Nganasan World View', in H. Rydving and K. Kaikkonen (eds.) *Religions Around the Arctic: Source Criticism and Comparisons* (Stockholm: Stockholm University Press): 227–55.
- . 2012. 'Is the Shaman indeed Risen in Post-Soviet Siberia?', in T. Ahlbäck (ed.) *Post-secular Religious Practices: Based on Papers Read at the Symposium on Post-Secular Practices Held at Åbo/Turku on 15–17 June, Finland, 2011* (Turku: The Donner Institute for Research in Religious and Cultural History): 350–87.
- . 2008. *'Vildrenen är själv detsamma som en gud': 'gudar' och 'andar' i sovjetiska etnografers beskrivningar av samojediska världsåskådningar* (Umeå: Umeå University and The Royal Skyttean Society).

- Veniamin. 1855. Samoyedy mezenskie, *Vestnik Imperatorskogo Russkogo Geograficheskogo Obshchestva* 14.2 (St. Petersburg): 77–136.
- Znamenski, Andrei A. 2007. *The Beauty of the Primitive: Shamanism and the Western Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).