
**‘Mother Earth’ is an Ancient Meme in the Global North:
Continuity between Eurasian-American ‘Mother Earth’
Concepts Demonstrated in the Athabaskan Case**

Joseph A.P. Wilson

Department of Classics
University of Massachusetts, Massachusetts, USA
joawilso@mtu.edu

Introduction

Sam Gill, in his influential book *Mother Earth: An American Story* (1987), provocatively argued that ‘Mother Earth’ as a supreme deity—popularly identified with ‘Native American’ religion in general—is not anciently indigenous to the Americas, but is rather a late modern amalgamation of several different Native American and Euro-American concepts, conflated and homogenized within Western academic discourse. I agree wholeheartedly with Gill that the notion of *one* universal Mother Earth, who permeates all indigenous religions, is an indefensible generalization rooted in 20th century ‘armchair anthropology’. But the inverse corollary (the absence of *any* ‘Mother Earth’ concept in pre-contact Native American cultures) is also an overly reductive and simplistic one, given the ubiquity of ‘Mother Earth’ beliefs in post-neolithic subarctic Eurasia and the late prehistoric relationship between major language groups on both sides of Bering Strait. I contend that European colonizers were not the first to combine and synthesize the goddesses of Eurasia and North America. I suggest that Athabaskan-speaking Native Americans share one identifiable Mother Earth concept with Yeniseian linguistic cousins in post-neolithic Siberia. Further, I regard this concept as congenitally related to a particular Mother Earth deity common to late ancient north Europe, via the multiethnic cultural continuum of the grassland steppe corridor connecting ancient central Europe to Siberia.

Background

Although Gill presents evidence from a wide range of indigenous contexts, my response is particularly concerned with Athabaskan-speakers (including the Navajo) and their linguistic relatives. After recounting several sincere politically engaged uses of the term 'Mother Earth' by traditionalist Navajo activists (Gill 1987: 142–44), he puts his position succinctly:

There are several lines of development in the Indian making of Mother Earth. Perhaps the most important is that the Earth was not formally referred to as a mother figure or goddess until the twentieth century. (Gill 1987: 145)

In his present reexamination of this material, Gill stands firm in this position, while nonetheless acknowledging that a contemporary trans-cultural 'Mother Earth' deity is a quite useful expression of contemporary pan-Indigenous solidarity and pan-human resistance to global environmental destruction. Gill appreciates the potential for Mother Earth to facilitate a 'virtual indigeneity' and notes:

Mother Earth, as meme, identifies the simple and obvious importance to people of home, land, country, for sustenance and identity. Mother Earth is a meme that implicates indigeneity, yet also a context of displacement and oppression and colonization. (Gill 2024)

Bjørn Ola Tafjord (2024) appreciates Gill's critical analysis of the 'upscaling' of diverse localized religious motifs in the service of a coalition of environmentalists, Indigenous and academic stakeholders concerned with urgent threats against the tangible planet itself, including all the natural life and ancient traditions it sustains. Nonetheless, he questions whether a conspired 'meme' has sufficient capacity to bind together all these dauntingly substantial interests. In a more pointed response, Mathew Glass bristles at the potential ramifications of an argument questioning the authenticity of 'Mother Earth' as an Indigenous concept:

...the practical implication of Gill's argument is the necessary conclusion that Indigenous invocations or references to Mother Earth are inauthentic expressions of their beliefs, practices and histories. It would be one thing if this conclusion remained something for scholars to consider and debate. However, it has a far more direct impact on the surrounding world for sustenance and identity. (Glass 2024: 220)

Each of these perspectives has merit. In my opinion, 'Mother Earth' in her current manifestation is *both* a product of tumultuous recent historical interaction (as Gill argues), and is authentically an ancient and

widespread indigenous concept (as Glass would argue). The timescale and geographic span are perhaps greater than Gill has estimated. And perhaps Gill also underestimates the ability of authentically Native American concepts to contribute substantially (as autonomous donors, not mere subjects of cultural appropriation) to what he has accurately observed is the robust cultural fusion at the heart of Mother Earth. Crisscross, rather than unidirectional borrowing is indicated by the antiquity of key concepts.

Gill suggests that the notion of a transcultural/universal 'Mother Earth' concept is a European invention, which more-or-less entirely postdates the work of Albrecht Dieterich (1905), *Mutter Erde*. I would beg to differ, and point out that explicit and literal Navajo invocation of 'Mother Earth', as the primordial consort to 'Father Sky', is found in the earliest reputable ethnography of Navajo religion, conducted by Washington Matthews among non-assimilated nineteenth century informants (Matthews 1902: 31–32). Both masculine 'sky' and feminine 'earth' primordial supreme deities are still stock motifs of Navajo traditional drypainting, ancestral to all subsequent members of the Navajo pantheon (see Figure 1). A generic 'Mother Earth' concept is often invoked to describe quintessential Navajo female creator figure 'Changing Woman', *Asdzáá Nádleehé* (who like the earth itself, creates with her own body). Nonetheless, there is an important semantic distinction to be made here. Changing Woman is seldom-if-ever depicted in religious art (unlike *her* Mother Earth who is often depicted). Changing Woman properly understood as one of the early daughters of the supreme mother, serving as a proxy for her and sharing the same physical nature of the primordial mother via descent. This is precisely parallel to the way historically derived ancient Eurasian deities may be viewed as offspring and manifestations, i.e., subsidiary expressions of older and larger deities.

Olle Sundström (2024: 230–36), in an otherwise enthusiastic reception of Gill's present work, points out that Mother Earth has great antiquity in Eurasia as well. Mother Earth may indeed be a modern viral 'meme' and a 'conspiracy' in Euro-American contexts, but she is an ancient deity in Northern Eurasia (substantially older than Dieterich's book). As Sundström indicates, the name 'Mother Earth' (literally translated) is relatively widespread within the ethnographic literature of the Uralic language family of Northern Eurasia, and particularly among the Samoyedic constituents of this family.



Figure 1: Mother Earth and Father Sky, by David Lee, Diné (Navajo), circa 1968. Sand, pigment, and glue on particle board National Museum of the American Indian (24/2964). Used by Permission https://americanindian.si.edu/collections-search/objects/NMAI_258323

Samoyedic speaking peoples (among others) reside in the Yenisei River drainage of western Siberia. That entire culture area is one where the Mother Earth concept appears very old on the basis of its vast ethnographic distribution. The paleo-Asiatic Yeniseian language family is now widely recognized as a linguistic cousin of Athabaskan, including Navajo (Kari and Potter 2010). Most of the Yeniseian languages went extinct in the Early Modern era. The only surviving Yeniseian language, Ket, also has an ancient indigenous Mother Earth concept. The Ket religion, like other indigenous Siberian religions and Native American religions, has a sophisticated ontology of personhood which regards humans as possessing multiple distinct souls (some virtuous, some malign) which in turn suffer different fates upon death. The most important soul (called *ulvei*) is the auspicious immortal 'wind', the animating life force connected to respiration in humans and animals. The 'wind' or breath-soul also reincarnates because it remains permanently bound (via the naval/umbilicus) to Mother Earth (Ket: *Bañamam*), in the manner of a mammalian placenta (Vajda 2011: 301; 2024a). Earth Mother and Sky Father are permanently linked in Ket cosmogony by a cosmic umbilicus connecting the north pole to the north star (Vajda 2024a). Na-Dene languages of America (including Navajo and Apache) and Yeniseian peoples of Asia share a single ancient cognate term for 'wind, exhale', reconstructed approximately as **bejx* in proto-Dene-Yeniseian (Vajda 2022: 383; McNeley 2009). The Navajo and Northern Athabaskans share a remarkably similar understanding of the 'breath-soul' connected directly to an Earth Mother via the human umbilicus,

animated by means of the thoracic pluck, i.e., the ‘heart-lung’ super-organ (see Baldwin 1997). Similar beliefs are found throughout Siberia and Western Subarctic North America (Wilson 2018). When modern politically engaged Navajo state that they are connected to Mother Earth by the umbilical cord (in the context of hotly contested contemporary land disputes), this is not a metaphor constructed in the wake of European colonialism (see Schwarz 1997). It is the detailed expression of a ~7000-year-old Dene-Yeniseian cultural pattern (see Vajda 2024b). Gill’s invocation of the etymology of ‘conspiracy’ is helpful here, as a ‘breathing together’ which is cognate with ‘spirit’. The Dene-Yeniseian wind-soul (in Eurasia and America) is quite literally breathed together with the placenta of the literal ‘Mother Earth’ via the human umbilicus. I would suggest the conspiracy is much older.

Discussion: Mother Earth as a Coherent Historical Entity in Eurasia and Beyond

Beyond the Uralic and Yeniseian languages, evidence for a widespread ‘Mother Earth’ concept is deeply rooted in Eurasia. The concept is firmly associated with the Turkic and Mongolic religion known as Tengrism, where ‘Mother Earth’ is paired with ‘Father Sky’ as the procreative coupling underlying the universal order. The precise cultural origin of this belief system is muddled by the fact that Tengrism’s supreme goddess, *Umai* (lit. ‘placenta’ or ‘womb’), is shared by both Old Turkic and Old Mongolian languages, and it is unclear which language is the original donor and which is the recipient. Alternatively, both languages may have inherited the same name from an archaic Eurasian cultural source (Sinor 1997: 28). The same dilemma precisely pertains to the complementary ‘Father Sky’ concept in this context. Alexander Vovin (2003: 389) proposed that the masculine deity’s proper name, ‘Sky’ (*Tengri*) is a loanword to both Mongolic and Turkic, originating from one of the extinct Southern Yeniseian languages spoken by one of the member nations of the Xiongnu (Hun) confederacy in ancient North China. The oldest example of this etymon is found in the 4th century BCE Chinese annals concerning the religious practices of the Xiongnu peoples (Roux 1965: 255). The Yeniseians are ancient paleo-Siberians, but they are also historical peoples. Their umbilical cord was never ‘cut off’ from their Eurasian neighbors. So, the Dene-Yeniseian and Finno-Ugrian cosmology discussed in the previous section is historically linked to other language groups in the neighboring Altai Mountains and grassland steppe regions of Asia (both Turkic and Mongolian).

Very early Yeniseian languages appear to have absorbed loanwords from the ancient Indo-Europeans via the Tocharian language of Central

Asia (Vajda 2024b: 476). The emerging consensus of archaeologists is that the Proto-Indo-European (PIE) linguistic group is securely represented by the Yamnaya archaeological culture of the Eurasian steppes (Olson 2023). Eastern Yamnaya cultural patterns physically overlap (and smoothly blend with) putative proto-Yeniseian archaeological cultural patterns since the Bronze Age. Cultural traditions (then as now) bridge the gap between language families. Despite this obvious cultural influence, the physical and genetic character of the south Siberian population systems has remained consistent over time. The linguistic relationship between modern Yeniseians and North American Indians is also reflected in the molecular genetics of both groups (Flegontov et al. 2016). Thus, the subtle West Eurasian influence of Indo-European migrants since the Bronze Age was likely more cultural than genetic, and could have been bi-directional (see Kozintsev 2022, 2023).

The evidence for the name 'Mother Earth' in West Asia and Mediterranean Europe is similarly extensive. The Linear B tablets from Thebes (e.g., TH Gp 227.2, Late Helladic IIIB phase, circa 1225 BCE), listing Mycenaean deity names, were yet undiscovered when Dieterich (1906) wrote, and yet unpublished when Gill (1987) wrote. Mycenaean Greek texts represent the earliest evidence for the migration of Indo-European steppe peoples (Yamnaya descendants) into the Aegean. The name *Mā Gā* (*Ma-Ka*), 'Mother Earth' is now generally accepted within these tablets (Witczak 2011: 57). A later example (in the Epic Greek dialect) figures prominently in the creation narrative contained in Hesiod's 8th century BCE *Theogony* (itself influenced by much older Mesopotamian literature). The image depicting the first Greek head-of-state, born from Gaia/Earth (a surrogate for the adoptive virgin mother Athena) is found on an Attic red-figure stamnos from the fifth century BCE (see Figure 2).

I am somewhat confused by Dieterich's evident failure to identify Greek and Roman analogues to his *Mutter Erde*, at least according to Pettersson (1967: 88–89) and Swain (1991: 4). Pettersson (1967: 89) seems to insist that the Roman concept of 'earth' was not a personal deific being, but merely an (inanimate) element. But I must caution that Latin (like its ancient Indo-European relatives) has an animistic substrate resulting in more than one term for 'earth', and clearly differentiates between the deified (animate) and mundane (inanimate) forms. I depend on Gill's (1987: 112) quotations of Pettersson (1967: 88–89). Nonetheless, I cannot help but wonder if the argument fails to account for the (4th-century CE) Roman literature on this very point, which distinguishes the theistic personification of the earth, *Tellus*, from the mundane material element 'earth', *Terra* (Honoratus, transcribed in Thilo 1881, line 171).



Figure 2: Detail of Mother Earth (Gaia) handing her son (Erichthonius or Erechtheus) to Athena. Attic red-figure stamnos, 470–460 BCE. Bavarian State Collection of Antiquities, Munich (2413). Public Domain Mark 1 (Wikimedia Commons). Available at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Erichthonius_of_Athens#/media/File:Birth_Erikhthonios_Staatliche_Antikensammlungen_2413_n2.jpg

Beyond these Greek and Roman cases, **méh_utēr*, ‘mother’ and **dhéǵhōm* ‘earth’ are among the most securely reconstructed Proto-Indo-European (PIE) words. Another common PIE divine epithet for ‘Mother Earth’, **p_lth₂uīh₂*, (cognate with English ‘field’) honorifically refers to this goddess’s vastness/breadth.¹ Some linguists express reasonable doubt about the PIE status of the deity herself, given the somewhat limited geographical distribution of the compound name within the vast Indo-European spread zone as a whole (Jackson 2002: 80–81). But at the very least these particular words were anciently compounded as proper deity names within the core steppe grassland territories of the Indo-European cultural hearth. In addition to the aforementioned ancient Greek examples, ‘Mother Earth’ is widely attested in Baltic-Slavic languages, and the name is often complemented with that of the unassailably attested PIE Sky Father, **dyéus ph₂tér* (Mallory and Adams 2006: 99, 209, 427–28). The distinction between (animate) personified deities and (inanimate) mundane elements/substances is not obscure but is fundamental to PIE grammatical genders (West 2007: 135–39). These particular languages arose within (or in close proximity to) the Eurasian steppes, near the ancient PIE homeland, and also near the frontier between the early Indo-European expansion and each

1. The subscript numeral in this reconstructed word is an idiosyncratic feature of PIE reconstructions, which in this case specifies the second of three slightly different fricative pronunciations represented by PIE letter **h*.

of the several aforementioned major North Eurasian language families. Diverse ethnolinguistic groups shared a similar 'Mother Earth' concept, not because it is universal, but merely due to mundane historical relationships within the neatly defined culture area of northern Central Asia. I think Gill would agree this situation is not the manifestation of any universal archetype, or the reappearance of a globally transcendent mother goddess. But I offer that it is the consequence of historical processes and interactions within the northern hemisphere. Deities of different pedigrees have conspired and converged in the Eurasian steppe corridor for a very long time.

To reiterate, the 'Mother Earth'/'Father Sky' dichotomy is admittedly not a 'universal' human category (as Gill correctly argues), but it is firmly attested in the ethnographic and historical record of the Mediterranean and Eurasia (from the steppes northward). One can defensibly hypothesize a post-Neolithic (or post-Bronze-Age) 'mother earth' fusion zone, located along the frontier between the Russian Steppes and Siberia. Indo-European, Uralic, Turkic, Mongolic and Yeniseian peoples have sustained mutual influence upon each other (demonstrated by both language and material culture) for several millennia at the very least.

Whence Came the Athabaskan Speakers to North America?

I am not a scholar of the South American or Australian indigenous religions which Gill has addressed in his very thorough research. My scholarship has been focused on the comparative cultural history of the Dene-Yeniseian language family, whose constituent members span the entire distance from western Siberia to the western US. I acknowledge the compelling basis of Gill's skepticism about a purely Indigenous 'Mother Earth'. Old generalizations about Native American religion owe much to the colonial imagination. My research nonetheless challenges some of Gill's central conclusions.

I would point to evidence for the likelihood of late prehistoric source motifs among Siberian-American subarctic foragers who practiced matrilineal kinship reckoning and matrilineal social organization. Many Athabaskan religious motifs are strikingly resonant with possible Eurasian homologs during later antiquity, especially among intermediary groups located in the territorial expanse between far-flung members of the Dene-Yeniseian phylum. The similarities form patterns through the collateral relationships between Indigenous peoples of both continents. It does not require recent European mediation for this derivation, because the migration routes between Siberia and Alaska were never closed. Many family resemblances connect Eurasian and

American religion in the last several millennia. 'Old World' and 'New World' religious motifs have common roots in the post-Neolithic circum-polar north, and 'Mother Earth' is plausibly an element of this shared 'package' of beliefs. There is no hermetically sealed population to be found in the last several millennia.

My argument here is narrowly focused on the particular Southern Athabaskan 'Mother Earth' concepts, which I contend were not recently borrowed (as Gill suggests), but were brought south with Apache and Navajo migrants from Alaska to the US Southwest within approximately the last 1000 years (Seymour 2012, 2013). Subsequent convergence of the Athabaskan Earth Mother with other deities (both Pueblo and European) is likely a result of strategic essentialism by autonomous Natives. Particular Indigenous religious traditions which seem to echo back and forth across Bering Strait should be examined in local context and case-by-case, without excessive resort to continent-wide generalizations (in agreement with Gill). But in the context of specific units like Dene-Yeniseian, we may engage in ambitious historical reconstructions and broad comparative analyses.

Cultural traits which are characteristic and deeply embedded throughout a widespread language family can be inferred to be part of that family's common cultural heritage. My research reconstructing proto-Athabaskan religion indicates a strong affinity between the peoples of Inner Asia and the early Southern Athabaskans, suggesting that Apache and Navajo preserve more of the proto-Athabaskan religion than is generally thought (Wilson 2016). The linguistic basis for these affinities is likely found in the back-and-forth admixture between Siberian and Alaskan populations during late Holocene epoch corresponding to the post-Neolithic period in North Asia (Wilson 2023). Historically, Southern Athabaskan religion has been regarded as a post-contact fusion with more complex Puebloan cultures, in part because the Apache and Navajo were erroneously thought to have arrived in the southwest only well after 1492. The current archaeological evidence suggests the movement was centuries earlier (Eiselt et al. 2023; Seymour 2012, 2013). The notion that the Navajo borrowed all their complex ceremonial practices from neighboring Puebloan horticulturalists is an old anthropological stereotype with little to no empirical basis. This view is informed by anthropological prejudices about the cultural impoverishment of subarctic foragers in comparison with the veritable cultural cornucopia that is found in sedentary village economies. When we limit ourselves to empirical evidence, we find that the archaeological traces of ancient sandpainting ceremonialism are considerably older and more firmly placed in the Navajo context than in the Pueblo context, turning the old stereotype on its head

(Wilson 2016; Wheeler et al. 1996). I do not think that arguments for a predominantly modern derivation and mostly synthetic character of the Navajo/Apache 'Mother Earth' deity can be defended on empirical grounds.

Conclusion

I suggest it is likely that there was a proto-Athabaskan female earth deity and a very similar female earth deity venerated by collateral relatives of the Athabaskans in historical Central Asia. Given that we now recognize a robust suite of shared linguistic and cultural patterns within the Dene-Yeniseian spread zone, we must consider that western North America and northeastern Asia were a single world system in ancient history, and that the Bering Sea was not a major cultural barrier. In particular, the solid reconstruction of proto-Athabaskan menstrual taboos and public female puberty rituals is remarkable (Perry 1977, 1983). Matrilineal/matrilocal social organization is strongly suggested as the proto-Na-Dene cultural pattern, otherwise unprecedented for major families of hunters and gatherers worldwide. But a similar matrilineal/matrilocal pattern was likely one of the predominant residence and kinship system patterns in a huge territory during the Asian Neolithic (Murdock 1955: 86). Much the same pattern is observed among Central Asian minority groups today (like the Newar and the Naxi), some of whom also uniquely preserve female puberty rituals remarkably similar to those reconstructed for the proto-Athabaskans.

Both Southern Athabaskans and Central Asians may ritually invoke explicit conceptions of 'Mother Earth' in strikingly similar contexts. For example, Archaic non-monastic Vajrayana Buddhist rites among the Newar of Nepal feature mock-marriages between sequestered pubescent girls (proxies for Mother Earth) with the male solar deity who is invoked through ritual drypainting (Lewis 1993). This Newar ritual script is holistically similar to Southern Athabaskan girls' puberty rites (see Markstrom 2008; Frisbee 1967). The wide distribution of Mother Earth concepts in Northeast Asia likely owes to the great mobility of key groups, and to the conspiring influence of indigenous shamanism, animism and esoteric Buddhism after the Siberian Bronze Age, less than 2000 years ago. Given that a robust suite of Siberian technologies (including specific bow-and-arrow designs, forged metal knives and clay pottery) entered the proto-Athabaskan cultural sphere from Siberia at precisely this historical interval, we must consider the possibility that an Old-World concept of 'Mother Earth' does have a pre-1492 kinship with a historically constituted indigenous North American deity, due to the straightforward proposition that Alaskan

cultures were never confined only to Alaska. Contact between the two continents was not inaugurated by Europeans. The process was underway for a very long time, likely as a result of the expansion of the Pacific Rim fur trade in recent millennia (Wilson 2005, 2023). As Vine Deloria Jr. argued, American Indians must have been connected to world history as early people (Deloria 1992: 597). ‘Mother Earth’ is not strictly a modern European contribution to Native American religions. An ancient North Eurasian concept was transferred naturally through integrated population systems which spanned both continents during historical antiquity. Distantly related Old World and New World belief systems continue to conspire and converge after European contact, as Gill correctly observes.

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