

## Tracing traditional beliefs in cosmogonic riddles

Sargylana Filippova, Varvara Filippova, Timur Timofeev and  
Evgeniy Beschetsnikov\*

**Abstract:** This article investigates the reflection of archaic beliefs in Evenk, Russian and Yakut cosmogonic riddles. Metaphorical images that are found in this genre of folklore provide insight into patterns of traditional culture and mythology. Folk riddles were investigated by means of contextual, semantic, and semiotic analyses that allowed us to identify archaic representations encoded in metaphorical descriptions of the sky and celestial bodies. We found that cosmogonic texts contain various illustrations of ethnic beliefs and artifacts of culture verbalized in the images of human beings, animals, household items, and natural and sacred objects. In the paper we also highlight key primordial ideas traced in the analyzed texts that reconstruct pagan mythological plots and storylines of an original or borrowed nature. Our ancestors, observing the sky and cosmic phenomena, through the genre of riddles transferred to subsequent generations the fragments of their perception of the universe encoded in metaphors linked with mythologemes of the world tree and primordial ocean. We conclude that riddles may serve as a reliable source for analyzing archaic representations of the universe and illustrating the specifics of the landscape, culture, traditions and households of an ethnos. As for similar motifs, they might be rooted in myths of borrowed character or caused by the similitude of human associative thinking in the allegorical encoding of universal natural phenomena. Overall, our research demonstrates that key images of the sky and cosmic bodies reflect the traditional representations and ideas of the three ethnic groups under consideration and allow us to identify similarities and differences in their perceptions of the world.

**Keywords:** cosmogonic riddle, archaic representation, myth, metaphor, image

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\* Sargylana Filippova; Timur Timofeev; Evgeniy Beschetsnikov  
North-Eastern Federal University named after M.K. Ammosov, Yakutsk, Russia

Varvara Filippova  
Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia), Yakutsk, Russia

## **Introduction**

Folk riddles, being an ancient folklore genre, can be regarded as texts belonging to oral tradition created by our ancestors to encode various phenomena in culturally determined metaphors and comparisons. As language facilitates the fixing, processing and preserving of knowledge gained in the process of human activity (Tarasov 2004, 36), folklore texts are reliable sources for analyzing archaic representations and beliefs articulated through language. In this regard, the ideas and images expressed through folklore texts can reveal how our ancestors perceived the sky and cosmic bodies. Numerous studies have established links between myths and riddles, showing that riddles comprise images originating from ancient mythological motifs that became the basis of the traditional beliefs and mindset of a people (Kaivola-Bregenhøj 2001; Stefanova 2007; Köngäs-Maranda 2011). The mythical nature of this genre of folklore might be traced in metaphors (means of secondary nomination) and references to storylines representing archaic mythologems and traditional realia (Zamaletdinov and Faizullina 2019), i.e. some texts might be considered transformed myths and legends. A riddle is closely connected with an archetype as it is “a short but wholesome and complete description of a part of the world... an attempt to capture the archetype and its transformations into words” (Stefanova 2007, 134). The genre is related to the notions of taboo, secret speech, and traditional rituals, and linked with mythological and poetical worldviews (Oyunskaya 1975; Filippova V. and Filippova S. 2021); a riddle corpora is regarded as the fundamentals explaining a model of the universe (Tsivyan 1994, 179). In this context, cosmogonic texts represent unique and interesting materials from a comparative point of view. The sky and celestial bodies, being common natural phenomena observed by different peoples, served as sources for various myths and legends concerning the creation of the universe; cosmic sphere was associated with deities and living beings as well as the realia of the surrounding landscape and domestic life.

Riddles constitute not only historically significant information about the ideas of ancient people, but culturally determined verbal codes uncovering “the deep connection of language with creative thinking” and explicating “the so-called internal form of the linguistic unit, conditioned by the ‘national spirit of the ethnos’” (Mamedova 2021, 140). In this aspect the comparison of images representing the same referents allows us to trace commonalities and specificities in the

perception and cognition of the surrounding world. The texts of riddles, being metaphorically encoded explanations, are considered clichés with ethnically determined images (symbols, codes, or signs) that reflect the peculiarities of perceiving, structuring, and reconstructing reality in the human mind.

This genre of folklore is a result of secondary nomination or semiotic encoding as it contains a key metaphor paired with an answer. The juxtaposition of these two elements is often built on figurative comparisons or associations based on correlations of these elements' external, internal or functional characteristics. An allegorical description of an object in a folk riddle constitutes information – metaphors or figurative equivalents – created by the ancestors, and this information reflects their mentality, history, culture, religious beliefs, ideas, and domestic sphere. People observed the surrounding world, identified common features or functions of various objects, detected their genera and species, and determined general, particular and special characteristics (Mechkovskaya 1998, 319). Thus, the origin and nature of a riddle is connected with the fundamental human ability to distinguish similarities between different phenomena and to frame connections and links between them.

In order to identify the elements of archaic beliefs of the Russians and two indigenous peoples of Siberia, the Yakuts and Evenks, we attempt to identify their images of the sky and celestial objects dematerialized by means of language and verbalized in the texts of cosmogonic riddles. In the course of the paper, we discuss common and specific components of the traditional mindset as well as the archaic nature of images and representations of the world's structure and its origin. Along with elements of the mythological worldview we found metaphors denoting unique details of material culture and traditional life such as traditional dwellings, household utensils, occupational activities and crafts. We believe that ancient ideas, myths, and artifacts, preserved in the texts of folklore, are available for a distant observer, and an exploration of riddles greatly contributes to the reconstruction of an ancient worldview and the conservation of the cultural heritage of an ethnos.

### **Materials and methods**

It is necessary to give some background about the Yakut (endonym Sakha) and Evenk ethnic groups. The formation of both ethnic groups took place in the territory of Yakutia, but their ancestral territory is the

Baikal region; therefore, there are many common elements in the culture and ethnic history of these peoples (Ushnitskiy and Alekseeva 2016, 74). Gogolev states that Yakut traditional culture developed under the influence of ancient and medieval Turkic tribes in South Siberia, Central Asia and the Baikal region; the formation of the ethnic group was also influenced by the Tungusic and Mongolian-speaking tribes (2018, 253). The ancestors of the Sakha people migrated from the southern and south-western Mongolian and Siberian regions, then gradually spread to the entire North of modern Central Yakutia (Ibid.). Researchers identify four stages in the ethnogenesis of the Yakuts: Huna period (from the 1st century BC until the 6th AD), Kurykan (6th – 10th centuries), Mongol (11th – 13th centuries), and Yakut (15th – 16th centuries).

The Evenks (also called Evenki; formerly called Tungus) belong to the Manchu-Tungusic group of the Altai language family. The most developed hypothesis of their ethnogenesis is that the Proto-Tungusic tribes were formed in Manchuria. Linguistically related ethnic groups are Evens, Negidals, Solons, Nanais, Ulchis, Oroks, Manchus, and Udeges, who are settled in the Republic of Sakha, Amur Region, Khabarovsk Territory, Magadan Region and China (Derevyanko 1976, 274). The similarity of language and culture serves as evidence that in ancient times their ancestors, referring to the Altai family, lived closer to each other. They migrated northward under pressure from the Chinese and settled in the taiga area of Siberia and the Far East (Ibid.). The Eastern Evenks occupied a vast area east of Lake Baikal and the Lena River, the southern border of their territory was the Amur River: in the north and north-west the Evenks bordered the Yakuts, in the north-east they were neighbors with the Evens, in the south, south-west and south-east there were Mongols, Daur, Duchers, Nivkhs and other peoples of the lower Amur (Turaev 2009, 90). Before the arrival of the Russians, the Yakuts had occupied a relatively small territory favorable for cattle breeding and had been surrounded by Tungusic tribes. While the Evenks actively resisted the Russians, the Yakuts began a rapid advance along the Aldan, Vilyuy, Olyokma, Kolyma, and Indigirka Rivers (Ibid., 92). The Evenks, defending their ethnic territory, resisted the expansion of the Yakuts, but inter-tribal conflicts of the Tunguses contributed to the advance of the Yakuts into Evenk territory. According to the census of 1897, there were 3.2 thousand Evenks, but their language, forms of economy and way of life already had a Yakut character (Ibid.). Nowadays Yakuts live in the Republic of

Sakha (Yakutia) situated in the north-eastern part of Siberia. As for the Evenks of Russia, they are settled within the borders of the Irkutsk, Amur, and Sakhalin regions; Krasnoyarsk, Zabaikalsky and Khabarovsk territories; and the Republics of Yakutia and Buryatia. In spite of their territorial prevalence, they are referred to as indigenous minorities and do not make up the majority of the population anywhere; they mostly live in the same settlements with Russians, Yakuts, Buryats and other peoples.

Thus, our choice of ethnic groups is not accidental; these ethnic groups within Siberian territories are closely related. For Yakuts and Evenks the formation of the Russian state was a sharp turn in their ethnic and cultural development. Nevertheless, it is necessary to note that in our research we did not attempt to identify the nature of mythological thinking verbalized in the texts of riddles, and we did not set out to determine the character of motifs in terms of their originality or borrowedness. We must underline that in our study we searched for common motifs and related storylines in traditional Evenk, Russian and Yakut riddles.

Folk riddles about the sky, the sun, the moon, and the stars were selected from a dictionary of Yakut riddles (Oyunskaya 1975) and collections of Russian riddles (Rybnikova 1932; Sadovnikov 1995). Due to the absence of dictionaries of Evenk riddles, the data was obtained from several books about Evenk folklore (Wasilewitch 1936; Voskoboinikov 1967; Romanova and Myreeva 1971; Afanasyeva 2005; Oyogir 2006).

To identify the traces of mythological representations and archaic perceptions of celestial space in Russian, Evenk and Yakut cultures we conducted the following stages of research: (1) we analyzed the semantics of cosmogonic riddles and compared their key images with the main mythological motifs about the creation of the universe; (2) we identified correlations between metaphoric descriptions and mythological representations by interpreting the metaphors as semiotic elements uncovering archaic ideas about the universe; (3) we identified references to realia which depict specific details of the traditional lives of the Russians, Yakuts, and Evenks. Thus, when studying the images of the world in these three ethnic cultures we applied a mixture of qualitative methods including semantic, descriptive, semiotic and interpretational analyses. For the purpose of convenience of presentation, example texts are labelled *R* (Russian), *Y* (Yakut) and *E* (Evenk).

## Results

In various myths the structure of the universe is portrayed through the image of a world tree or pillar that symbolizes the source of life, creation, fertility, and sacredness of the world (Eliade 1987, 156). The prototypes of the tree are found in the Ancient Near East, India, and Iran, and they spread across Eurasian cultures including shamanic ones (Ibid., 157). Within the macrocosm the vertical axis of the universe has three horizontal levels: the sky, earth, and underworld (Ibid., 145). In the microcosmic view it constitutes a central pillar in an ancient dwelling or the domed top of a circular dwelling (Ibid., 150). The first motif is observed in Russian riddles with metaphorical descriptions of the sun:

*R: Stoit dub, na tom dube-vertidube sidit jasnaja sova (ptica veretenica), nikto ee ne pojmaet: ni car', ni carica, ni krasna devica (Rybnikova 1932, 236) / There is an oak tree, a bright owl (a spindly bird) sits on that oak, no one can catch it – neither the king, nor the queen, nor a beautiful maiden.*

*R: Na sinem more, na divane, stoit dub s kornjami, nikomu ne podojti k nemu (Ibid.) / On the blue sea, on the divan there is an oak tree with roots, no one can approach it.*

In the first text the universe is represented in a vertical projection, and the sun is encoded in the images of inaccessible birds sitting on a tree, indicating the sun's upper location in the structure of the universe. A world tree with birds on its branches is one of the popular motifs of Slavic, German and Eastern European peoples. The cosmological scheme of a bird on top of the tree is also found in myths of Central Asian and Oriental cultures, and the same symbolism was used on prehistoric monuments (Eliade 1987, 158). In various sources two birds sitting on the top or upper branches of the world (on the right and left sides of the vertical trunk) relate to the sun and the moon, and the whole scheme can be understood as a kind of cosmological model (Ivanov and Toporov 1980, 346). In the second riddle the sun is a tree itself growing on a soft surface (clouds) located in a water source (the sky). On the one hand, complex images of the sun and surrounding objects are projected horizontally, on the other, the sun is described as a central vertical axis – a tree that serves as an inexhaustible source of life. The image of an oak is closely connected with the mythological ideas of Slavic and Indo-European peoples: in the Proto-Slavic language 'oak' denoted the general concept of the world tree; in some

myths an oak constituted a mythical representation of a cloud itself with roots as living water (rain) and honey dripping down from its leaves (dew); as for the sea it portrays not only the location of the sun, but a heavenly ocean; the sky is regarded as a water source (Afanasyev 1982, 214).

In Yakut riddles the idea of a world axis is observed in texts depicting stars and the moon:

*Y: Uraghas töbötüger ojuu tikpittèrè ühü (ojuu-bicik baar ühü) (Oyunskaya 1975, 34) / They say that ornaments are sewn onto the cone of a pole [answer: the Pleiade].*

*Y: Aan dojdu ortotugar kömüs sèrgè turar ühü (Ibid.) / They say that in the middle of the universe there is a golden serge [answer: the North star].*

*Y: Aan dojdu ortotugar sètè sèrgè turar ühü (Ibid.) / They say that in the middle of the universe there are seven serges [answer: Ursa Major].*

*Y: Xaryja ürdügèr kömüs bihilèx yjaanan turar (Ibid., 37) / A silver ring is hanging on a fir tree [answer: the moon].*

In the first riddle stars are described as ornaments sewn onto the head of a post (pillar); *uraghas* ‘pole’ denotes either a rafter of a yurt (Fedorova 2019, 38) or a long cattle control pole with a noose (Gogolev n.d.). Both notions are linked with the idea of a vertical axis connecting the earth and the sky, reflecting the locus of celestial phenomena; constellations are associated with patterns that are sewn on the top of the world structure. In the second and third texts the North Star and Ursa Major are encoded through the image of a wooden vertical tethering post for tying horses and cattle called a *serge*, which was also used to perform certain rituals. Such posts are one of the most widespread religious monuments in the Transbaikal region; they served as important elements of special ceremonies, and the process of installing a *serge* was sacralized. Turkic-speaking peoples had various ideas about the appearance of *serges* and their number, but for all of them *serge* embodied a prototype of the world tree (Sleptsova 2017, 193). In these texts we also observe the traces of archaic Indo-European and Turkic peoples’ ideas describing the North Star as a sacred post in the central part of the universe. It is necessary to note that the central locus of the cosmic object depicts its key position among other stars as ancient peoples believed that the North Star not only shines in the middle of the sky but holds up the heavenly tent like a pole (Eliade 1987, 146-150). The concept of the world tree is evident

in the riddle about the moon illustrated as a *silver ring on a fir tree*. This idea corresponds with Yakut beliefs that there was a tree with eight branches on the golden navel of the earth. However, M. Eliade underlines that it is hard to believe that such an image could have been invented by the Yakuts in the harsh climate of the North Siberia, thus, the prototypes of such an image are rooted in the cultures of the Ancient Near East, India, and Iran (Ibid., 157).

In Evenk riddles the idea of a vertical axis is expressed in the microcosmic plan through the image of a circular dwelling called a *chum*, where its roof or top part denoted *nyuk* represents the firmament above the human space:

*E: Dyrjavyj njuk (in Russian)* (Romanova and Myreeva 1971, 45) / *Nyuk with holes* [answer: stars].

*E: Djūdu bagdama xè rmipt̄yn olgodëron* (Oyogir 2006, 161) / *Under the top of a chum, a white boot sole dries up* [answer: the moon].

The motif of stars as holes in the sky, in cloth or in a dwelling's roof was widespread among African, European, Asian, Baltic, Siberian and Mesoamerican peoples (Berezkin and Duvakin n.d., motif i55). In the first riddle we observe a metaphor depicting a *nyuk*, or top part of a *chum* or a yurt - thus, the universe structure constitutes a traditional dwelling of the Evenks. The domed top of the yurt is regarded as the sky; stars are presented as multiple holes on the upper level of the world. In the riddle about the moon the universe is described as a *chum*, which is a conical portable dwelling made up of poles connected at the top; the poles are covered by birch bark in summer and reindeer pelts in winter. The image of the moon is possibly linked with ancient ideas of its creation: living beings (whose shapes are visible on the moon) or the moon itself rose to the sky in a hurry, missing one pantleg or a shoe or a mitt or even a leg (Ibid., motif A43). Archaic ideas about the moon's creation as well as interpretations of the world as a conical dwelling were expanded by the specificity of the Evenks' domestic life. At the top of a *chum* there was a smoke hole that also served as a light source, and in the central part of a *chum* there was a fireplace above which the Evenks installed two horizontal poles. The lower one was used for cooking (hanging a kettle and boilers), the upper one for drying clothes (Koval n.d.). A metaphorical description of the moon implicitly indicates its impermanence and temporary nature as clothes and boots were hung up to dry during the evenings and nights. We suppose that people observed drying clothes and boots

in the light of the moon coming through the smoke hole and such observations resulted in the placement of the moon under the top of the vertical axis of the world. The location of this celestial object under the cone of the *chum* also reflects the proximity of the moon to the earth in comparison with other cosmic bodies. As for the sole of a reindeer boot, on the one hand, it might be a trace of the motif about the moon's creation (a living being with one shoe), on the other hand, it might characterize the shape of the new moon.

In Yakut riddles we also found metaphors correlating with beliefs regarding the sky as a household dish covering the earth:

*Y: Kōmūs yaghaja kōmōghōjō, xara yaghaja xappagha, siri ihit siksigè baar ühü* (Oyunskaya 1975, 24) / *They say there is a handle of a golden bucket, a lid for a black bucket, and stitches on a leather bucket* [answer: the sun, sky, earth].

*Y: Balaghan ürdügèr soluuččax umsa sytar ühü* (Ibid., 23) / *They say that an upturned soluuchakh (bucket) lies above the balaghan* [answer: the sky].

*Y: D'ie ürdügèr ünükür čaasky tüñnèstè sytar* (Ibid.) / *An upturned oval cup lies over the yurt* [answer: the sky].

In the first text the sky constitutes a lid located above a bucket – the night firmament – covering the earth. Eliade notes that such archaic representations served as explanations of the origins of some natural phenomena, for example, sometimes the lid did not manage to close tightly, and gaps served as spaces for strong winds to enter the earth's domain (1987, 146). The sun and earth are also illustrated as Yakut buckets: the source of light is explained through the metaphor of a bucket's rounded handle indicating the course of the sun (around the earth); the earth is of leather color (brown) and has stitches on its surface that depict uneven terrain. In the second and third riddles, the form and location of the sky are portrayed through the images of upturned round dishes that are placed over the human realm, represented as Yakut dwellings – *balaghan* and *yurt* (*balaghan* is a Yakut dwelling built of slanted logs). In these riddles we observe not only the traces of pagan beliefs but the elements of traditional way of life: cognition of the space above the earth has been transformed into metaphors of domestic objects. The perception of the sky as a roof or a lid of the world did not expand into abstract or sacral concepts but transferred into common and everyday household items such as traditional Yakut dishes and utensils.

The idea of a lid or a dish above the earth is closely connected with the motifs associating the firmament with a tent, cloth, clothes or pelt covering the world.

*E: Irēksəkēkun huklēderèn , saṅarkākučī (Afanasyeva 2005, 7) / There lies a big pelt, full of holes [answer: the sky and stars].*

*E: Hègdymèmè āvun. Dolborokin, topčičī –imènnèčī ōvki (Ibid.) / A big headdress. In the night it is all covered by buttons [answer: the sky and stars].*

*E: Tar ēkur multakša kujinè? (Wasilewitch 1936, 135) / What is it – a pelt of a wild deer with holes? [answer: the sky and stars].*

*R: Goluboj šater ves' mir nakryl (Rybnikova 1932, 234) / A blue tent covered the whole world [answer: the sky].*

*R: Postelju rogožku, poseju gorošku, poseredine – kalač (Ibid., 234) / I'll lay out a gunny cloth, sow peas, with a kalach (round bread) in the middle [answer: the sky, stars, moon].*

*R: Sinen'kaja šubenka okutala ves' mir (Ibid., 231) / A blue fur coat enwrapped the whole world [answer: the sky].*

*Y: Aana èmèxsin sonun abyraghyn kyajan abyxatmmat ühü (Oyunskaya 1975, 33) / They say that the old woman Anna cannot stitch up the patches on her fur coat [answer: stars].*

*Y: Kōjūür taṅahy tēhè sièbitè baar ühü (Ibid.) / They say there is cloth with holes made by moths [answer: stars].*

*Y: Kūōx son bütiin aan dojdunu burujbut ühü (Ibid., 23) / They say that a blue fur coat has enveloped the whole world [answer: the sky].*

The perception of the firmament as a heavenly dome or a tent above the earth was common for many archaic cultures (Eliade 1987, 146). This idea corresponds with metaphorical descriptions of the sky in the examples given above: in Evenk texts it is interpreted in metaphors of a pelt and a big hat; Russians encoded the celestial space in the images of a gunny cloth, blue tent and fur coat; Yakuts compared the firmament to a fur coat and a cloth. According to ancient mythology a tent, hut or dome formed a roof and walls over the ground; thus, a dwelling made of cloth was considered the vault of heaven surrounding the human realm and constituting the general space for the earth and the sky. It is necessary to note that in Evenk and Yakut riddles archaic ideas of the sky as a tent transformed into metaphors linking the upper sphere with basic female crafting activities such as processing raw pelts and sewing (buttons on a big hat), that is why stars are represented as holes, patches, breaks, or buttons in the canvas of the sky. Moreover, in the Yakut language the Milky Way is denoted

'*khallan siige*' with the meaning 'celestial sewing stitches'. The narratives about holes in the cloth are also found in other folklore genres: in the Yakut tale "Ilja Boroosku" a hero grabs a swan that lifts him up to the sky, and he notices that the vault is made of suede (processed pelts), the stars are wormholes, and heavenly light penetrates through them (Berezkin and Duvakin n.d., motif i55). In Evenk culture the night sky resembled a pelt with holes left by gadflies; in the heroic tales of Amur Evenks the sky is depicted as a carpet thrown over the earth, and a fixed static hole (the North star) serves as the entrance to the upper world (Ibid., motif i55).

In archaic mythology the stars and other celestial bodies are not only set or nailed or sewn onto the firmament of the sky, but they float on the heavenly ocean; thus, the sky is regarded not only as a cover / lid or roof of the world, but also a huge liquid mass (Ibid., motif B3A). The same interpretations are found in Evenk, Russian and Yakut folk texts:

*E: Djukèdu purčava xumtèčēl* (Oyogir 2006, 161) / *На льду сушеную рыбу рассыпали* / *Dry fish are scattered on the ice* [answer: stars].

*R: Bežali ovcy po kalinovu mostu; uvideli zarju, brosilis' v vodu* (Rybnikova 1932, 107) / *Sheep were running along the bridge, but when they saw the dawn, they rushed into the water* [answer: stars].

*R: Po seredine morja stoit zolotaja kamora* (Ibid., 236) / *A golden chamber is in the middle of the sea* [answer: the sun].

*R: Sivka more pereskačil, a kopytca ne smočil* (Ibid., 233) / *Sivka horse jumped over the sea but did not wet its hooves* [answer: the moon].

*Y: Ulaghata-uhuna billibèt uluu muora baar ühü* (Oyunskaya 1975, 23) / *There is a great sea, with immense length and width* [answer: the sky].

*Y: Küöl uñuor ulluñax yjaanan turar* (Ibid., 37) / *Behind the lake there is a hanging sole* [answer: the moon].

*Y: Küölgè kyhyl kömüs balyk usta syld'ar ühü* (Ibid., 26) / *A golden fish swims in a lake* [answer: the sun].

*Y: Muora (örüs, küöl, bajghal) ortotugar kömüs kytax (čaasky, tèrièlkè) usta syld'ar ühü* (Ibid., 25) / *They say that in the middle of the sea (river, lake, ocean) a golden bowl (cup, dish) floats* [answer: the sun].

*Y: Shañaan byara örüskè ustar* (Ibid., 26) / *A burbot liver floats in the sea* [answer: the sun].

Such storylines existed in various cultures, for example, in Sumerian mythology the primordial ocean surrounded heaven and earth. In Biblical cosmogony the primordial water moved apart, formed the top and bottom, and the world ocean was placed above the arch of the firmament; heavenly waters were connected with the sea and rivers that had their sources in Heaven (Berezkin and Duvakin n.d., motif B3A). The given examples of riddles allow us to trace the ideas of primordial oceans in all the analyzed folklore texts. The ancestors of Evenks, Russians and Yakuts transformed their representations of the upper sphere into an allegorical description of the sky as the water element. Along with the metaphor of liquid mass, we found other interesting illustrations of celestial bodies. Specific images are found in the Evenk riddle *Dry fish are scattered on the ice* where the depiction of the sky reflects the harsh climatic conditions of their territory: the frozen landscape is reconstructed and duplicated in the upper space. It is interesting to note that Western Evenks believed that the Endekit, the main shaman river, is sourced from the upper world in the east, then flows to the west, turns towards the north and flows into *bukit* – ‘death locus’ – an abyss where eternal darkness and cold reigns (Ibid., motif i81). Similar ideas about the origin of the sky can be observed in Yakut texts: the sun is floating in the middle of a body of water; the moon is described as a sole of a boot behind a lake. In Yakut riddles about the sun there is animalistic symbolism similar to Evenk motifs, according to which the celestial body is compared to a *golden fish or burbot liver* floating in heavenly waters.

In Russian riddles there are also motifs related to the zoomorphic nature of celestial bodies where cosmic objects were encoded by animalistic images. Afanasyev states that the comparison of celestial bodies with cattle was characteristic of primitive tribes of Aryans who saw bulls, cows, sheep and goats in the sky, reconstructing in the upper sphere the features of their own pastoral life (1995, 386). In the Russian text about stars, sheep are identified as an innumerable herd that disappears in the water of heaven in the dawn. The horse image in the Russian riddle about the moon symbolizes power and life source; in mythology this animal is often associated with the sun, and this link is explained by the metaphor of speed (Shesterkina 2009, 177). As previously discussed, the sun and moon were regarded as two birds sitting on the top or upper branches of the world tree. The bird as a flying creature not only implied its location in the celestial sphere but also embodied speed; in this context, Shesterkina believes that the

interpretation of a celestial phenomenon as a fast-flying object was transferred into the image of a fast-running horse (Ibid.). It is necessary to underline that in Russian riddles this zoomorphic code alludes to only the moon or clouds. If the moon is depicted as a horse, its animalistic description is combined with the attribute of the color *sivyj* or the magical horse *Sivka* or the adjective *lysyj* ‘bald’. In the Russian language *Sivka* is linked with the notion *sivyj* ‘grey, blue-grey, grey-headed’ and correlates with the color of the moon in the night sky (Dal’ 2006, 184). A bald horse representing the moon is not accidental; it illustrates the central night object unobscured by clouds in the dark sky. Notably, this parallelism is mirrored in Russian terms used to describe horses: a white spot on a horse’s forehead is called *lysina* ‘a bald spot’ or *zvezdochka* ‘star’ (Afanasyev 1995, 69).

Let us consider other zoomorphic images of cosmic bodies:

*E: Čto èto za korovij rog na vsej ljudej smotrit?* (in Russian) (Voskoboinikov 1967, 159) / *What is a cow horn that looks at all people?* [answer: the moon].

*E: Polovina gluxarja* (in Russian) (Ibid., 170) / *Half of the capercaillie* [answer: the moon].

*R: Dva byka bodutsja – vmeste ne sojdutsja* (Rybnikova 1932, 235) / *Two bulls butt each other but they won't come together* [answer: the sky and earth].

*R: Buraja korova čerez prjaslo gljadit* (Sadovnikov 1995, 281) / *A brown cow is looking through a fence* [answer: the sun].

*R: Baran v xleve, roga – v stene* (Ibid., 284) / *The ram is in the barn, its horns are on the wall* [answer: the new moon].

*R: Belogolova korova v podvorotnju smotrit* (Ibid., 283) / *A white-headed cow is looking at the gateway* [answer: the new moon].

*Y: Balaghan ürdügèr kürèñ oghus baar ühü* (Oyunskaya 1975, 26) / *They say there is a red bull standing over the balaghan* [answer: the sun].

*Y: Sur sylgy subun tuhaxtalaax* (Ibid., 34) / *The forehead of a grey horse has an extended bald spot* [answer: Ursa major].

*Y: Xonuuta mèrèjèdèmmètèx, baraana aaghylybatax, manyhyta muostaax baar ühü* (Ibid., 24) / *They say there is someone whose fields are not measured, the sheep are not counted, and the shepherd is horned* [answer: the sky, stars, moon].

*Y: Biir manyhyt tyhyñčanany naghy manyyr ühü* (Ibid., 38) / *They say that one shepherd grazes thousands of cows* [answer: the moon and stars].

In all the cultures we found images of a cow or bull. In primordial perception, daylight or the sun itself, which gives birth to the day, was identified as a white or red bull or cow; night was associated with a black cow, and day with a white one (Afanasyev 1995, 369). Such identification of the night could influence the moon image. On the other hand, the moon might be called a bull or cow in accordance with the shape of the new moon resembling a horn. In everyday life cattle provided food and clothing; and the celestial sphere, being the source of light, warmth, and spring rains, was also regarded as a blessed gift. According to the similar functions of cattle and natural phenomena, our ancestors perceived cosmic bodies as cows, sheep, or goats, and produced synonymic notions. In Sanskrit *go* means 'bull', 'cow', 'sky', 'sun rays', 'eye' and 'earth', the words *ida*, *ila*, *ira*, *aditi*, *gagati*, *mahi*, *matar*, and *surabhi* denote 'cow' and 'earth' (Ibid., 365). In this context, the convergence of bulls and heaven is not accidental; pagan beliefs expanded into additional figurative meanings and polysemy. That is why an explicit and implicit depiction of a bull or cow in the texts concerns various objects: the earth and sky (two butting bulls), the sun (brown or red), or the moon (horns).

Specific metaphors are observed in Evenk and Yakut riddles: in addition to the horn and bull or cow, the new moon is described as a capercaillie's half, referring to the resemblance of their shapes; an interesting comparison is found in the Yakut riddle about *Ursa major* that carries traces of archaic Turkic and Indo-European storylines regarding the universe as a horse. Constellations are depicted as bald spots on the horse's forehead, and such an illustration correlates with the beliefs of ancient Indians who identified celestial objects as body parts of a sacrificial original horse (Akishev 1984, 31). In a Yakut complex riddle about the moon and stars there is a motif representing herds of cows in the sky under the rule of a shepherd. Perceiving cosmic objects as bulls, cows, sheep and goats, ancient tribes could reflect their own pastoral life in the images of people grazing cattle (Afanasyev 1995, 386). It is also necessary to note that, in general, personification of celestial phenomena is closely connected with ancient beliefs about the anthropomorphic nature of celestial elements.

*E: Èma asatkān umūkin inderèn* (Afanasyeva 2005, 7) / *A girl lives alone, who is she?* [answer: the girl on the moon].

*E: Togo dōdun bèe ilitčaran* / *There is a human inside the fire* (Ibid., 7) [answer: the moon].

*E: Človečišče ves' v dyrkax* (in Russian) (Voskoboinikov 1967, 160) / *A human with holes over the body* [answer: stars].

*R: Odin pastux tysjači ovec paset* (Rybnikova 1932, 234) / *One shepherd grazes thousands of sheep* [answer: stars].

*R: Krasnaja devuška po nebu xodit* (Sadovnikov 1995, 280) / *A red girl walks in the sky* [answer: the sun].

*R: Zolotoj xozjain – na pole; serebrjan pastux – s polja* (Ibid., 283) / *A golden master enters the field; the silver shepherd leaves the field* [answer: the sun and moon].

*Y: Aan dojdu kyyha ogholorun üörètèr ühü* (Oyunskaya 1975, 38) / *They say that the daughter of the universe teaches her own children* [answer: the moon and stars].

*Y: Taba manyhyttaryn bastynnara kimnèxtèrè billibèt ühü* (Ibid.) / *They say, it is unknown who is the best shepherd of reindeer herds* [answer: the moon and stars].

In anthropogonic myths natural phenomena initially had an anthropomorphic appearance; the entire universe was often described as originating from parts of the body of the first human being (Ivanov 1980a, 87-88). In all of the cultures analyzed for this study we found images encoding the moon in a metaphor of a person: in Evenk riddles the moon is portrayed as a girl or genderless human; in Russian it is illustrated as a shepherd managing its cattle (stars); in Yakut there are motifs of a shepherd and a girl – a daughter of the universe. Lunar myths were widespread in close connection with solar ones: relationships between the moon and the sun were often interpreted through the prism of kinship terms, masculine and feminine images (brother and sister, twins, son, daughter, husband and wife) (Ivanov 1980b, 79-80). In the Russian riddles about the sun and moon we observe a hierarchy of natural objects: in Russian cosmogony the sun is regarded as a master, and the moon as a shepherd. The link between the moon and shepherd is noted in the Yakut text: stars are reindeer, and an anthropomorphic personage grazes the herd and plays a leading role in the night sky. It is interesting to note that in this riddle there is an implicit reference to several human beings, as the question *who is the best shepherd* focuses attention on the diversity of characters managing the herd, hinting at the changeable shape of the moon. The lunar phases, including the moon's appearance, growth, decline, and disappearance, might result in the creation of cyclical concepts. In archaic apocalypses and antropogony the lunar cycle was compared with the birth, growth, and death of humanity (Eliade 1987, 90).

The data demonstrate that archaic peoples were inextricably linked with nature and cosmic rhythms; in pagan beliefs the cosmos might be regarded as an abode of the gods; it might also personify a divine image. For example, the anthropomorphic representations of the sky and stars in Evenk culture in the riddle about a *human being with holes* implies the idea of a heavenly divinity or a human who constitutes the space or was relocated to the upper space from the earth. The image of the sun as a red girl in the Russian riddle serves a trace of several storylines about the feminine character of the sun: it is a girl who travels along the sky on a divan made of stars, she is afraid of the night, that is why when it gets dark she is replaced by her brother-moon; the sun is a girl with wings, her clothes give light; the sun-girl travels on a fire horse, she has several sisters who replace each other while moving along the firmament – reference to the cycle of sunrise, dawn, and sunset (Berezkin and Duvakin, motif A4). Personification of the sky and celestial bodies was characteristic of many cultures that perceived the sky or cosmic objects as gods or mythical personages. Thus, images found in Evenk, Russian and Yakut riddles reveal traces of beliefs about the anthropogonic origin of natural phenomena.

## **Conclusion**

The contextual and semantic analyses of Evenk, Russian and Yakut cosmogonic riddles defined key lexical units representing the sky and celestial bodies. A semiotic approach to metaphors helped us recognize basic archaic ideas about the cosmos and its objects. Riddle, being one of the ancient genres of folklore, is closely related to myth, and that is why it comprises symbolic images related to traditional beliefs. The selected cosmogonic texts proved to be interesting and reliable source materials in the investigation of archaic metaphors. We found illustrations of the sky and celestial bodies as anthropomorphic and zoomorphic creatures; in Russian riddles we found the idea of the phytomorphic nature of the universe depicted in the image of the world tree; in Yakut and Evenk texts the world's structure is represented by the concept of a vertical axis constituting sacral tethering posts and traditional circular dwellings.

Cosmogonic riddles conserved some ancient ideas about the origin, nature and character of the sky and cosmic objects. The traces of these beliefs are found in Evenk, Russian, and Yakut texts, displaying the mythologemes of the world tree (vertical axis) and primordial ocean. The celestial space is explained in metaphors of cloth, pelt, cover or lid

above the earth, and in Yakut culture the motif of lid was transferred into the images of household utensils upturned over a human dwelling. Zoomorphic comparisons are traces of animalistic storylines about the sun and moon representing a bull or horse; stars are regarded as cattle or sheep or reindeer under the guidance of a shepherd. These ideas serve as clear examples of reconstructing the human sphere in the upper space. Ancient peoples duplicated their pastoral life in texts illustrating the upper sphere; the role of cattle as sources of food and clothes expanded to their sacralization, and they were considered companions or helpers of gods and deities. Worship of some animals and their relatedness to the cosmic world are also connected with zoomorphic characteristics of deities and gods.

Natural phenomena, described as anthropomorphic creatures, depict the mythologemes of the universe's creation: key metaphors reconstruct not only archaic structure of the world, but motifs of its origin where the sky and cosmic bodies acquire human features. Pagan ideas about the anthropomorphic nature of the world and universe that originated with prehistoric tribes transformed into storylines about divine heroes or gods living and functioning in the celestial sphere, and these representations are traced in folk riddles. It is necessary to underline that anthropomorphic images also reflect the hierarchy of celestial objects, denoting the leading role of the sun in comparison with the moon and indicating the moon as the main body in the night sky in comparison with stars.

In general, we must conclude that riddles can be used as unique sources of information that reveal traces of archaic mythological motifs. Riddles preserve extensive comprehensive information about ancient representations and traditional life, and images expressed through metaphors display universal mythologemes and archetypes of the world's structure and creation. Key themes of the texts also highlight specific interpretations and perceptions of celestial space. For example, an archetype representing the universe structure as a vertical axis reflects diverse ideas: in Russian riddles celestial bodies are located on the upper level of the world tree, which for the Russians is an oak; in Yakut texts there are images of sacred vertical objects and traditional dwellings; the Evenks depicted the world in microcosm as a circular yurt. This means that key words and metaphors implemented in the folk riddles should be regarded as unique codes reflecting the mythological structure of the universe, traditional beliefs, and historic and ethnographic realia.

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