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# THE WORLD AS A LIVING ENTITY: ESSENTIALS OF A COSMIC METAPHOR

**Michael A. Rappenglück**

*Adult Education Centre and Observatory, Gilching*

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*Corresponding author: Michael A. Rappenglück (mr@infis.org)*

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## ABSTRACT

Among the archaic cosmologic and cosmogonic concepts of cultures worldwide and across time the metaphor of the world as a giant living entity is significant. People cultures considered the universe to be e.g. an animal, a giant human, or an egg. The anatomy of certain creatures, in particular of the human being, served as an excellent model for the world's spatial construction, time-factored changes and cycles of reproduction. The giant cosmic living being showed a form of metabolism, respiration, and reproduction, appearing e.g. as wind currents, water cycle, seasons, tides, lifecycles of plants, animal, and humans, linked to celestial phenomena. People especially considered heaven and earth to act like the human reproductive organs and identified the cosmos with a giant womb. Moreover, the cosmogonic first and essential dichotomy, which causes the world's diversities, was compared with a kind of primordial sacrifice of a giant cosmic living entity. People regarded the landscape, a cave, a dwelling, a cultic building, or a settlement as an embodiment of the cosmic living entity in miniature, reflecting the characteristics of the macrocosmic being. This study gives an overview of ideas considering the world as a living entity, with respect to cultures through the ages. Concepts of iatromancy are included. The methodology uses approaches of comparative mythology, studies of religions, archaeology, anatomy, medicine, and social anthropology.

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**KEYWORDS:** Mundane Man, World Egg/ Animal/Plant, Cosmic Embryology, Comparative Mythology

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## 1. THE WORLD EGG: EMBRYOLOGY AND COSMOGONY

According to traditions of people all over the world the cosmos – the organized world – arose out of a formless, soundless, chaotic, unlimited (watery), nevertheless animated, fluid floating in a dark abyss (Yu, 1981; Lukas, 1894; Baumann, 1986; McClain, 2011; Leeming, 2010). That entity was thought to be androgynous (Baumann, 1986; Chevalier and Gheerbrant, 1996). Occasionally, e.g. in ancient Egypt and Greece, it was associated with the unaging time – sometimes personified – too (Lukas, 1894). That matrix forever exists. That is the first and uncircumventable stadium of the universe.

According to ancient Egyptian, Phoenician, and Indian traditions the primeval matter is kindled up by a sun-like, sexual heat ('desire'), a kind of helical vibration, compared to a whirlwind (Lukas, 1894; Kaelber, 1976; Baumann, 1986). This process often is taken as a 'fire-making' (Rappenglück, 2016). The turbulent primordial fluid produces the mundane egg, which people considered to be a womb-like structure. That is the second stadium of the universe, which generates a cosmos (Lukas, 1894). The concept of the World Egg is part of mythologies all over the world (Lukas, 1894; Long, 1963; Toporov, 1967; Demetrio, 1968; Kuiper, 1970; Ochsenschlager, 1970; Girardo, 1977; Maringer, 1981; Snodgrass, 1985; Baumann, 1986; Chand Patyal, 1995; Chevalier and Gheerbrant, 1996; Naumann, 1996; Locke, 1997; Valk, 2000; Alsobrook, 2008; Rambelli, 2009; Leeming, 2010; Nissire, 2017). Ancient traditions, e.g. in Egypt, Africa, and Oceania tell that a creator being, which people imagined as a bird, a reptile, or a fish, lays the mundane egg and hatch it (Lukas, 1894; Kuiper, 1970; Ochsenschlager, 1970; Perkins, 1980; Baumann, 1986; Leeming, 2010). In a Lithuanian myth the sun bred the world egg and thus generated the earth (Lukas, 1894). Rarely the cosmic container may be vegetal, too: a lotus blossom, e. g. in traditions of ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, the Mediterranean, India, China, and Mesoamerica (Lukas, 1894; Rappenglück, 2014), a gourd, e.g. in traditions of the Yoruba, Africa (Baumann, 1986), a coconut, e.g. in Indian and Philippine myths (Lukas, 1894; Demetrio, 1968), or even a beefsteak fungus, which is compared with an egg according to myths of the Pangwe, Africa (Baumann, 1936; Baumann, 1986). Moreover, the World Egg was symbolized by a clam shell, revolving in space, e.g. according to traditions of the islanders of Raiatea and Tahiti or ancient Babylonia (Baumann, 1986; Rappenglück, 2014), a placenta, e.g. in the myths of the Mande and Dogon, Africa (Dieterlen, 1993b; Leeming, 2010), or a human skull, e.g. in Indian tradition (Baumann, 1986). Especially the

lotus appears to be associated or even combined with the world egg motif, e.g. in Egyptian and Indian traditions (Lukas, 1894). For the Parsees and in Taoism (Laozi) the earth is hovering in the centre of the universe like the yolk embedded in an egg (Lukas, 1894; Allan, 2003).

Within the essentials of the world, matter and light are incubated and primordially designed (Lukas, 1894; Dieterlen, 1993b; Leeming, 2010). An antagonism and a polarity of water and fire appears (Rappenglück, 2016). Male and female germs are bisexual mixed within the world egg as told in myths of ancient Egyptian and Mesopotamia, Asia and Oceania, and Europe (Lukas, 1894; Long, 1963; Baumann, 1986; Chevalier and Gheerbrant, 1996; Alsobrook, 2008). The female (lunar) and male (solar) force and principle go apart. According to traditions at different places on the world antagonistic twins, often characterized as male and female and sometimes located at both ends of the world axis, are responsible for the separation (Long, 1963; Neumann, 1975; Baumann, 1986; Chevalier and Gheerbrant, 1996; Stross, 2007; Leeming 2010; Rappenglück, 2014).

Phoenician and Orphic traditions have the myths of a divine being (a kind of demiurge) cracking the world egg (Lukas, 1894) into two parts. The world egg segregated into two halves, resembling the cosmic hemispheres: The upper halves shaped the skies, the lower the earth or the underworld, as it is told by myths in Europe, Asia, Africa, and Oceania (Lukas, 1894; Naumann, 1996; Chevalier and Gheerbrant, 1996; Alsobrook, 2008). According to Indian myths both pieces of the eggshell are associated with certain colours: silver [earth] and gold [sky] (Lukas, 1894; Baumann, 1986). A variant of the idea concerning a first splitting of the world egg is presented by the Ngadju Dajak, Borneo (Baumann, 1986): Heaven and Earth are two primordial eggs retrieved by a female and a male bird diving into the primordial sea.

Beside the dichotomous, a trichotomous concept existed, e.g. in Indian and Oceanian myths: The burst of the cosmic egg created heaven, earth, air or heaven, earth, ocean, or heaven, air, and underworld (Lukas 1894; Baumann, 1986). A third entity, mostly thought to be air or light, separates the hermaphroditic cosmic unity into two sexes (Baumann, 1986). A variant of the trichotomous model is given by the Tibetan Bon religion (Leeming, 2010): Three eggs – a golden, a turquoise, a white one – setup the world. The first two are parts of a primordial polarity. The third egg contains the golden spindle (the world axis) separating the other two.

Myths handed down by the ancient cultures of Europe, Asia, and the Middle East show that the

split-up of the World Egg is closely related to the motif of the primary spherical, hermaphroditic anthropoid, who was cut off and transformed into the pair consisting of both sexes: a first female and male human being (Baumann, 1986; Demetrio, 1968). Cracking the cosmic egg generated the primeval World Parents twins, who are considered to be brother and sister constantly copulating incestuously (Baumann, 1986; Leeming, 2010). According to Indian traditions three parts were formed – the shell, the white, and the yolk – representing the heavens, the air, and the earth (Baumann, 1986). Ancient Finno-Ugric people deliver another pattern: The yolks become the sun, the whites the moon. The spotted fragments change into stars, the black into clouds (Leeming, 2010; Chevalier and Gheerbrant, 1996; Valk, 2000). According to traditions of the Christian Middle Ages and of Old Norse (Simek, 1990) the cosmos is shaped like an egg containing the spherical earth in the center and wrapped by four envelopes (Honorius Augustodunensis [\*1080; † 1150 or 1151] /Old Norse), which were associated to the classical elements: the eggshell (sky / fire), the thick and thin albumen (ether/water), the yolk together with the vitelline membrane (air/earth), the drop of fat (germinal disc) or the cuticula (earth/air). Moreover, the cosmic egg is subdivided into seven shells, e.g. in ancient Indian myth (Lukas, 1894) or even nine shells, e.g. a myth of the Kogi, South America (Schuetz-Miller, 2012). The model of the seven shells may have been related to the orbits of the seven wandering stars. More speculative, but known from ancient Indian astronomy, it was extended by two more orbits represented by the lunar nodes named Ketu and Rahu (Monier-Williams, 1899), each considered to be a kind of hidden celestial body, shaping a cosmic egg of nine shells.

A certain corresponding embryology and cosmogony was developed among others by ancient Greek (Orphism, Pre-Socratics, Plato, Aristotle), in the Hellenistic Epoch (Corpus Hippocraticum: *De Hebdomadibus*), or by Iranians, Indians, Tibetan, Chinese, West African people, and Finns (Lukas, 1894; Baldry 1932; Wilford, 1968; Racine, 1983; Dieterlen, 1993, 123–124; West, 1971; West, 1994; Alsobrook, 2008; Craik, 2015). The idea of a kind of ‘amniotic membrane’ enveloping the primordial cosmic ‘embryo’ was important for the Pre-Socratics (Guthrie, 1956) and the Dogon, Africa (Dieterlen, 1993b). The Pre-Socratics thought that it was made of a gelatinous, ice-like, or crystalline matter.

According to traditions of peoples there was a third stadium of the developing cosmos in which a huge world being, an animal (e.g. a bear, a bovine, a wapiti [deer], an elk, a turtle, a shell, an octopus, a serpent or a dragon), a male or female human or in

some cases a plant appeared born from the primordial matrix (Erkes, 1941; Chevalier and Gheerbrant, 1996; Lemming, 2010, 303–305; Rappenglück, 2006; Rappenglück, 2014; Rappenglück, 2017). Myths coming from ancient Egypt, Europe, Asia, and Oceania tell that a (divine) giant cosmic anthropoid, sometimes thought to be bisexual, emerged from an embryonal existence within the World Egg (Lukas, 1894; Demetrio, 1968; Clarke, 1974; Baumann, 1986; Alsobrook, 2008). The giant World Man is known as Zeus (–Protogonos–Pan), Phanes, Chronos, and Eros (Orphism), Ra and Khnumû (Egypt), Benu or Phoenix (Hellenistic period), Amma (Dogon, West Africa), P’an-ku (China), Prajapati, Purusha, Brahma, and Vishnu (India), Tangaroa, Tangaloa, and Ta’aroa (Oceania), Angngalo (Philippines), and other naming. Myths coming from Finland, Egypt, India, Oceania, and Africa also deliver that the sun(–god) during rising or setting at the horizon was born from the cosmic egg. At that daytime and position the oval shape (caused by refraction) indicated the obvious parentage from the world egg (Lukas, 1894; Baumann, 1986; Renngli, 2000).

## 2. PRIMEVAL SACRIFICE OF THE COSMIC BEING: COSMOGONY AND COSMOLOGY

A number of people thought that the killing, dismemberment, dispersal and stretching out of a giant primordial being by a good or bad divinity created the various constituents and living things of the world. The mundane being was considered to be a [giant] man or woman (e.g. Gayomart, Manu, Ndü, Pan’ku, Purusa, Prajapati, Tiamat, Yama, Yima, Ymir), an animal (e.g. a clam, a turtle, an octopus, a quadruped mammal), a mythic chimera, or a plant (e.g. world tree [different species], lotus) (Barton, 1893; Lehmann-Nitsche, 1934; Erkes, 1941; Zerries, 1952; Long, 1963; Hoang-Sy-Quý, 1969; Lincoln, 1975; Yu, 1981; Baumann, 1986; Snodgrass, 1985; Kaltenmark, 1993; Shaki, 2001; Alsobrook, 2008; Leeming, 2010). People interpreted that process as a kind of primeval sacrifice or self-sacrifice (Lincoln, 1975; Snodgrass, 1985; Leeming, 2010). Frequently a twin entity is responsible for the fragmentation, as delivered by Proto-Indo-Europeans (Lincoln, 1975), North and South American, and African people (Rooth, 1957; Leeming 2010).

## 3. THE WORLD BEING’S BODY PARTS AND THE COSMIC FRAMEWORK

People all over the world associated the cosmic being’s body parts with the constitutive framework of spatiotemporal world: skyscape, landscape, seascape, netherworld with all the related objects and

creatures (Barton, 1893; Creed, 1925; Rooth, 1957; Hoang-Sy-Quý, 1969; Snodgrass, 1985; Mundy, 1998; Schwartzberg, 1992a; Schwartzberg, 1992b; Chevalier and Gheerbrant, 1996; Major, Queen, Meyer, and Roth, 2010, 240–243). That model can be traced back at least to the fifth and fourth millennia (Lincoln, 1975), but may be rooted in Upper Paleolithic (Rappenglück, 2007). The motif of the cosmic man perpetuates through the Christian Middle Ages (Kurdziałek and McDonald, 2014). The anatomy of certain creatures, in particular of the human being, served as an excellent model for the world's spatial construction, time-factored changes and cycles of reproduction. People linked the head, the limbs, the skeleton (especially the vertebral column), the nervous, the circulatory and the digestive system, the navel, and the sensory organs of a female or male giant to basic essentials of the cosmos. Moreover, the giant cosmic living being showed a form of metabolism, respiration, and reproduction, appearing e.g. as wind currents, water cycle, seasons, tides, lifecycles of plants, animal, and humans, linked to celestial phenomena (Rappenglück, 2007; Rappenglück, 2013; Rappenglück, 2014; Rappenglück, 2017). People associated the structure of space according to the limbs of the cosmic creature (four-legged, e.g. mammal, eight-legged, e.g. spider, octopus), which gave them 4 or 8 extensions (Lukas, 1894; McClain, 2011). The centre – head, heart, navel – added the cardinality up to five (quincunx) or nine (magical square). Frequently a plant, sometimes the lotus (Lukas, 1894; Rappenglück, 2014) or often the world tree (Rappenglück, 2017) substituted the cosmic creature. In the case of the lotus the eight petals replace the world animal's limbs. The number of the world tree's branches (3, 6, 7, 10, 12, 14) is another example for associating plant components to archaic cosmology (Rappenglück, 2017). Concerning time, the limbs and joints of the universal being could represent the months, the seasons and the year, or other time cycles (Major, Queen, Meyer, and Roth, 2010; Rappenglück, 2017). The body of the cosmic creature was modelled in early cult buildings, domestic houses, and tombs (Snodgrass, 1985; Rappenglück, 2013). People recognized the universal being as represented by caves and by the landscape (Bastien, 1985; Rappenglück, 2007; Rappenglück, 2013). Ethnological and archaeological data as well as the comparative mythology make evident that man at least since the Upper Palaeolithic (45–10 ka BP) considered a cave as a woman's womb with the internal and external female genitals (Rappenglück, 2007). She embodied the matrix of the Great Mother of the cosmos who, inseminated by male powers, creates and destroys the diverseness of the world. People also repeatedly associated a twin peak with the

breasts, a main river with the birth canal, the navel with the world's center, the umbilical cord with the Milky Way (or with the cosmic axis), and the phallus with the zenithal or polar world axis (Schuetz-Miller, 2012). In addition, there is a tradition identifying the 28 lunar mansions (Nakṣatras) or the zodiac signs with the shape of a cosmic man (Bober, 1948; Schwartzberg, 1992a; Harley and Woodward, 1992, Plate 27). According to the Kabbalah (12<sup>th</sup> c. AD) the ten Sefirot, a cosmological structure, are thought to be the limbs of the primordial man Adam Kadmon (Singer, 1901; Altmann, 1968). Finally, traditions deliver that the social order and cultural achievements originated from the cosmic creature's body (Lincoln, 1975).

#### 4. THE SEPARATING AND CONNECTING THIRD ENTITY

Ancient people identified the entity separating and connecting heaven and earth with a cosmic hermaphroditic anthropoid giant, a double-headed reptile (snake, dragon, crocodile, etc.), an octopus, a World Tree (sometimes entwined by two snakes) or a lotus a phallus, a cord (umbilical, spinal), a spindle, a World Mountain, all denoting the world axis (Demetrio, 1968; Korvin-Krasinski, 1964; Ochsen-schlager, 1970; Green, 1977; Snodgrass, 1985; Lincoln, 2001; McEvilley, 2002; Rappenglück, 2014; Rappenglück, 2017). Traditions often handed down the analogy and correspondence of the spine with the world axis, the world tree, the world man carrying or the cosmos, the ruler (Korvin-Krasinski, 1960; Rappenglück, 1999). Certainly it didn't escape the notice of man that the quantity of the 33 vertebra in different sections of the backbone according to anatomical properties could serve for remembering important cosmic numbers useful for memorizing time units and spatial order: 7 (Cervical spine), 12 (Thoracic spine), 5 (Lumbar spine), 5 (Sacrum), 4 (Coccyx [Tailbone]). Some examples: 4 and 5 (cardinality and center), 7 (number of wandering stars, days in a week), 12 (hours, zodiacal asterisms) or if adding the sets, one could count e.g.  $7+12+5=24$  (hours),  $24+5=29$  (days in a synodic month) and so on. The same way Atlas supported the sphere of the sky the first cervical, which is called 'Atlas' upholds the 'globe' of the head (Rappenglück, 1999). Especially interesting is the idea that the human spine is a meatus, through which sperm, thought to be produced in the head (brain) and being transformed into marrow, flows to the receptacles in the genitals (Kuiper, 1970; Schwabe, Adams and Hodge, 1982; Tardieu, 1992; McEvilley, 2002). It is known from traditions of many cultures, e.g. in Asia, Europe, the Middle East and especially from spiritual-physiological techniques like yoga or alchemy (White, 1984; McEvilley,

2002; Gold, 1996). The concept behind this is to some extent still available in the theory and practice of Kundalini Yoga, which combines psychosomatic, spiritual, astrologic, and cosmologic ideas (Mansfield, 1981; Hari, 1998; Khanna 2003/2004; Stross, 2007). The Bambara (Africa) consider the world axis to be a vertical bone in the centre of the cardinal points containing life-giving marrow (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 1996). In addition, the divinity Aion (Classical antiquity) embodying the world of cyclic time, was related to spinal marrow and the force of life (Suda online, 2003). According to the Desana, South America, getting access to the transcendent realm is possible through a gigantic tubular bone, which they connected with the world axis, the phallus, and the spine (Williams, 1973). This cosmic bone offers continuously fertilizing energy (spinal fluid, semen) flowing from the heavens to the earth. It seems that even in Mesoamerica a similar concept was present (Stross, 1996; Stross, 2007): the skull and the sacrum embodied the entity of a snake with two heads. That might be correlated cosmologically and anthropologically (Rappenglück, 2014) to heaven (mind; avian-like) and underworld (matter; reptile-like). They thought that the soul enters and leaves the body through both of these. The spine marrow reminded people of a certain milky substance, which they thought to be related to semen: From that view it is understandable that they considered the Milky Way to be the 'backbone of the sky' and a flow of celestial sperm (Rappenglück, 1999).

## 5. COSMIC BEING AND HUMAN BODY: MEDICAL ASTROLOGY/ IATROMANCY

Archaic cultures saw man as an integral component of the cosmos. The human body is considered to be a microcosm, condensing the whole universe, interwoven and interacting with the macrocosm (Wayman, 1982; Flood 1992; Albrile, 2005; Papapetros, 2010; Kurdzialek and McDonald, 2014). Vice versa the macrocosm was considered to be a macroanthropos. That concept is also adapted to certain selected organs of specific animals, which embody the cosmic processes in miniature, e.g. the hepatoscopy (Collins, 2008). Body parts (head, brain, eyes, mouth, skeleton, vertebral column, navel, limbs, circulatory system, nervous system, digestive system, sensory organs) act not only on a biological,

but also on a psychological, cosmologic, and cosmogonic level, e.g. in Sumer and ancient India (Korvin-Krasinski, 1960). A good example for that model is the Taoist "Interior Landscape" (Neijing Tu), which presents an encoded mixture of shamanistic, alchemical, medical, psychological, philosophical, and cosmological concepts (Needham, 1983) of the human's body and the cosmic entity. Within the biological body there is a subtle body, which mirrors the cosmos. In the best case, which means to be healthy, the rhythm of the cosmos and of the human body are aligned.

## 6. THE HABITAT AS MODEL OF THE COSMIC BEING

People all over the world regarded the landscape, seascape, a cave, a dwelling, a cultic building, or a settlement as the body and mind of the cosmic living entity. Ritual processions especially related to the structures and the landscape, time-factored by the biotope or astronomical phenomena, served to animate and empower them and to renew cosmogony (for literature see Rappenglück, 2013). Archaic cultures repeated the process of primeval creation ritually at the founding of habitations and by specifying sacral-cosmic landscapes, because they wanted to participate in the originally creative power of the cosmos (Rappenglück, 2013). According to some people the dwelling and the landscape had a head, limbs, a navel, genitals (female, male), and an anus. Moreover, they showed a skeleton (skull, spine, bones, especially the backbone, joints), a nervous, a circulatory and a digestive system, and sensory organs. Some people took the view that the housing and the landscape can breathe, eat and drink, store, exude, excrete, grow, menstruate and reproduce, degenerate, and perish (Rappenglück, 2013).

## 7. CONCLUSION

That brief illustrates that the topic addressed was an impressive, memorable metaphor for illustrating the structure of the cosmos as a kind of giant organism, involving the microcosmic man. Even today the motif is alive in landscaping, e.g. the Garden of Cosmic Speculation (2003) and the Crawick Multiverse (2015), created by Charles Jencks (1997, 2003, 2011), or in the Gaia hypothesis presented and discussed by James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis (2000).

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