

The Gods in Tierra del Fuego

–Echoes of the Selk'nam's Tradition–

Here I am singing, the wind takes me. I am following the footsteps of those that are gone. I have been allowed to come to the Mountain of Power. I have arrived to the Great Mountain of the Sky, I walk to the Sky Home.

The power of those who have passed away comes back to me. I enter the House of the Great Mountain of the Sky. Those that dwell in the Infinite have spoken to me.

Lola Kiepja – one of the last Selk'nam (1966)

Ancient Cultures in Tierra del Fuego

The young Austrian ethnologist and Jesuit missionary Martin Gusinde (1886-1969) arrived to Santiago of Chile in 1911. By 1918 he travelled for the first time to Tierra del Fuego in the extreme South of Chile and Argentina. Since then, in Río Fuego, in Estancia Viamonte, in Lake Fagnano –or K'ami– and in Punta Remolino, he systematically recorded the rich and diverse manifestations of the austral indigenous cultures. This is how he got in touch with the legendary Selk'nam –or “Clan of the Chosen Branch”, known as well as Onas– who shared with him some of their magical and esoteric knowledge such as the *Háin* initiation ritual.

The results of his valuable field research are the following books: *Feuerland Indianer. Band I: Die Selknam* (“Indigenous People of Fire Island. Part I: The Selknam”, 1931), *Feuerland Indianer. Band II: Die Yamana* (“Indigenous People of Fire Island. Part II: The Yamana”, 1937) and *Anthropologie der Feuerland Indianer* (“Anthropology of the Indigenous People of Fire Island. Two of three parts of this last work was destroyed during the bombing in Germany in World War 2 – what was rescued was published only in 1974).

Consequently, Gusinde recorded the ancient myths and traditions of the last living Selk'nam, whose fate was determined by the European colonialists that arrived to their venerated Tierra del Fuego by the end of the 19th century.



Left: The Selk'nam in their magical path in both worlds: The physical and the spiritual (Ca. 1910). Right: Schematic map of Tierra del Fuego, in the southernmost extreme of South America. It was the land of the Selk'nam.

The Myth of the Sun and the Moon: Cran and Cra

In the myth of Cran and Cra –this is, the Sun and the Moon respectively–, there is one of the most important keys to understand the vision of the world of the Selk'nam. This myth speaks of the usurpation of the power of men done by women, obtaining as a result the direction of the society, reversing the order that was established by Quenós, the god-man sent by the Supreme Temáuquel, the Creator of Heaven and Earth, the “Master of Men”, the “Dweller of High Above”, who also sent the Hóhuen –or *Hóowin*–, immortal beings that first lived in the world and from where the Selk'nam descended according to anthropologist Anne Chapman.

It was Quenós who created men. One of the informants of Gusinde explained the way he did it: *Quenós went to a swamp and took mud from it, squeezing it in order to eliminate the water that it contained. Then he formed two generative organs, one male and the other one female and place them on the ground. At night they united and this is the way the first of our ancestors was born, the first Hóhuen. In the second night appeared the second Hóhuen and so on.*

These first men grew immediately, without experiencing the slow development of our children. In few days they were perfect Selk'nam, tall, slender, well-shaped, strong, skilled hickers and hunters.

Quenós not only created men but also taught them how to speak, instructed them in their duties, showing each gender their tasks and obligations and establishing the order of life.

The myth of Cran and Cra speaks not only about the confrontation between patriarchy and matriarchy, which had also cosmic consequences, but it is too the basis of their culture.

This saga refers that in the Age of the Hóhuen –or ancestors of the Selk'nam of the mythical time–, women guided by Cra tricked men with the aim to establish a matriarchy. Thus, they gathered during several months in a ceremonial hut known as *Háin*. From a crack in the centre of the floor of this hut, a raging and starving female creature emerged from the underworld: It was the terrible Jálpen. Men, fooled by women, had to take there large amounts of guanaco meat to feed this monster so it would not devour their women.

Of course, men knew about Jálpen only by women and their dramatic screams from the inside of the *Háin* performed in order to make them believe the women's hearsay. Along with Jálpen there were other “spirits” that emerged from the underworld.

This trick was discovered by Cran –the husband of Cra– who told about it to all the rest of men. They decided to stop the affront and killed all grown-up women because they have broken the precepts of Quenós. The only woman who managed to escape was Cra but without being thrown first to the fire and getting her face burnt. After this she escaped to the sky where she became the Moon and Cran became the Sun, in everlasting persecution.

When the order of Quenós was established again, the Hóhuen –Wacus, Pawus, Senu, Sate Talen, Keyaisk and Yoisik– travelled to the four directions of the island and finally gathered at mount Máustas –today's Mitre Peninsula–, bringing each of them one stone pillar from each of their *haruwen* or native areas. With these seven pillars they built a new *Háin*. The first four pillars represented the cardinal points and the three remaining an intermediate position. Just as the *Ruka* of the Araucanos, the *Háin* was a micro-representation of the cosmos. The territories of the island were divided in more than eighty sections; they were delimited by the seven stone pillars

of the *Háin* and were known as *Sho'on* or heavens. In this regard, it is important to remark that each of these heavens had a sacred tree that supported them. This concept has clear similarity with the *Quetzalhuexotl*, or “Beautiful Willow”, the tree that holds the heaven after the Deluge in the Mesoamerican tradition. Also, each of these *Sho'on* was represented by a specific figure in their ceremonies characterized by one particular body paintings.



Two Koshménk standing next to the ceremonial *Háin* or sacred hut during the ceremony of 1923 (Photo by Martin Gusinde, 1923).

In this sense, Gusinde wrote about the *Háin* he witnessed in 1923: *The entrance of the hut faced the East. This disposition corresponds to a remote precept. “The first ancestors wanted that the entrance faced East and therefore we have kept that tradition”. Our hut of the Klóketen had a diameter space of 8 meters; the width of the entrance was in a straight line of 4,35 meters and it became smaller as it would reach up where it ended in a cone. The vertical distance to the cone, this is, the real height was of almost 6 meters.*



The performers of the *Kewánix*, a sacred dance related to the spirit-goddesses Tanu. All these men wear the K'ochel or triangular hat and have body paintings (Photo by Martin Gusinde, 1923).

When the Hóhuen built the first *Háin* they decided to preserve the ceremony of homologous name, displaying the same representations of the “underworld spirits” performed before by women such as Hó-krek, Koshménk, Kulan, Kulpush, Sho'ort, the Haylían, Tanu and Ulen and the “sky spirits” such as Halaháches, Mátan and to some extent, K'ternnen, the son of Jálpen.

The Mythical Rite

In the performance of the mythical rite of the *Háin* ceremony “directed” by a *Jon* or shaman, the “actors” played solemn movements and positions with the aim to fascinate, impress or scare the observers. It is in the *Háin* initiation ceremony where the *Klóketen*, this is, the young men were taught about the Supreme God Temáuquel, the Hóhuen, the struggle between women and men and their traditions.

It was by 1919 when Gusinde met the *Jon* Tenenesk, a fortunate episode that allowed him four years later to obtain the permission of Tenenesk to record and photograph the sacred *Háin* ceremony.

Certainly, from the origin of the events described in the myth and 1923 much of the primary elements lost their initial meanings or became altered.

What it is really known of the primitive ceremonies of the Selk’nam? What was the origin of their rituals preserved in the *Háin* ceremony? Who were the underworld and sky “spirits”? What is the source of the extraordinary conic masks and the symbolism of the *Sho’on* or heavens represented in their body paintings? All what has been known of the Selk’nam are the records of European scholars educated in the evolutionist theories and the 19th century rationalism. As a result, besides the valuable works of for instance Martin Gusinde, there must be no doubt that he filtered or censored the ideas and concepts of the Selk’nam to his Christian faith. Therefore, those entities or gods that emerged from the underworld or *Hollow Earth*, or those sky beings, became “spirits” in order to not contravene his monotheist faith. And even more, much of the core of the Selk’nam’s secret traditions must have been lost forever as their knowledge was absolutely enclosed as historian Carlos Keller has explained in his 1948 book *Dios en Tierra del Fuego* “God in Tierra del Fuego”) in relation to the wisdom of the *Jon*: *It is very likely that if you would ask any of them, they would keep the most hermetic silent and he would not say a word about what he knows.*



Left: The powerful Jon or shaman Tenenesk (1923). Right: The priest Martin Gusinde (1934).

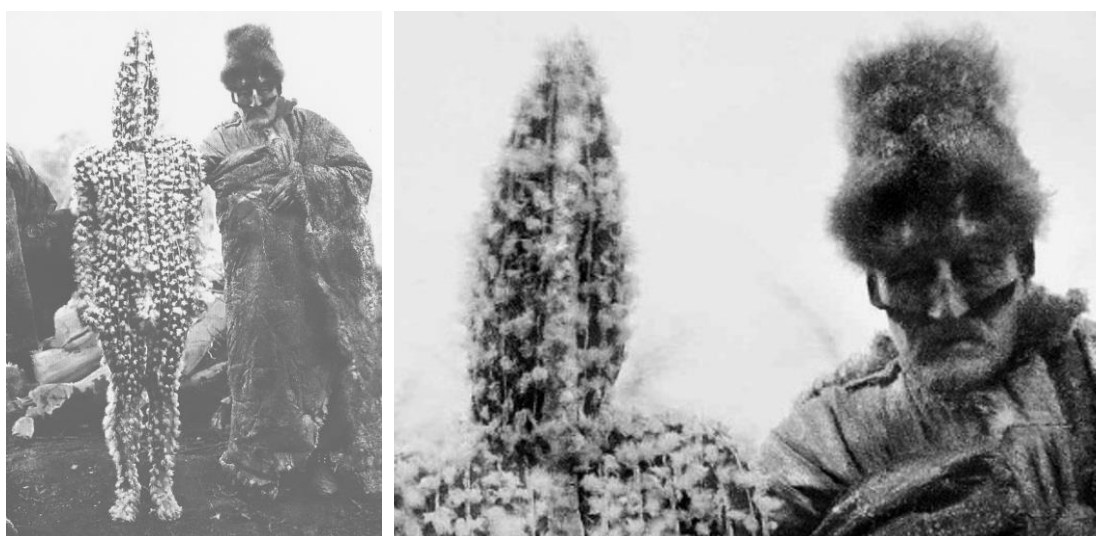
Along with renewing the myth through the ritual, this is, the re-establishment of the order of Quenós, the *Háin* ceremony corresponded as well to the initiation of young men to manhood. Their bodies were painted with precise colours, patterns and symbols. They were taught the secrets of the origin of the world, the mysteries of the Sun, the Moon and the stars; the secrets of Nature; their magical traditions; also, they were instructed in hunting and the moral and ethical behaviour to follow.

After their initiation they could never reveal what they have learnt. Once all the tests have been achieved, the initiate received a triangular hat or *K’ochel*. Then they were recognized as men and were able of marrying.

As all the performances of this ceremony, the Selk'nam played very dramatic acting and movements.

When Jálpen, pregnant by the initiated, was about to give birth, she became very furious and killed most of men inside the *Háin*. Another “spirit” that attacked men was Halaháches, “spirit of the sky”, known as well as Kótaix.

Thus, after most men were killed, all became silent. Women wandered around but could not find the bodies –men had to hide in a nearby forest– until Olum, a small sized being but a *Jon* with great power, would bring the dead back to life. Subsequently, women and men gathered and sang in order to calm down the anger of the ferocious Jálpen. Only then she gave birth to K'ternnen –the “Man-of-Light”– who, as a new born being, could not walk by himself and had to be helped by the main shaman. His body was covered by light-coloured feathers over the red painting of his body. K'ternnen represented the new cycle. His appearance indicated the end of the ceremony.



The fascinating and enigmatic figure of K'ternnen, the son of Jálpen, held by the *Jon* Tenenesk (Photo by Martin Gusinde, 1923).

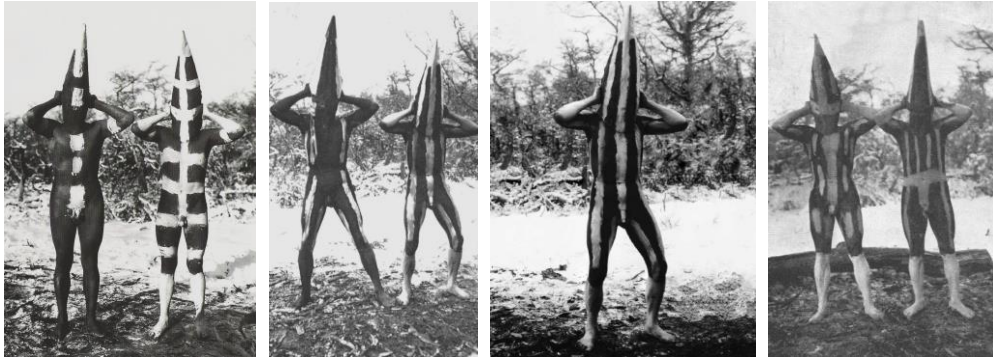
The “Spirits”

Could have a Christian missionary during the first decades of the 20th century write about the “gods” of a culture such as the Selk'nam which had preserved traditions about the underworld and sky deities? Could have Gusinde explain the resurrection performed by Olum of the Selk'nam that was preserved in their rituals? Could he have explained the arrival from “high above” of the civilizing astral race of the Hóhuen? It is not hard to understand the difficulties that Gusinde had to face when he learned about the vast and significant culture of the Selk'nam. Unquestionably, his scientific and religious formation had filtered their traditions, just as it happened before with the *cronistas* and the intolerant missionaries in relation to the *idolatrías* in the rest of the continent.

And today, anthropologists and historians do not differ much as they too lack the understanding of the reality of the “spirits” and the events preserved in the myths of the Selk'nam.

So, who were the “spirits” of the underworld that emerged from a crack inside the sacred space of the *Háin*? Was it just the imagination of the ancient Selk'nam?

Was this myth a reason to illustrate the antagonism between patriarchy and matriarchy as some anthropologist or historian would like to interpret it? If so, how can the specific representations of the “spirits” –masks, colours, patterns and symbols– be explained?



Different representations of the conic headed Koshménk (Photos by Martin Gusinde, 1923).

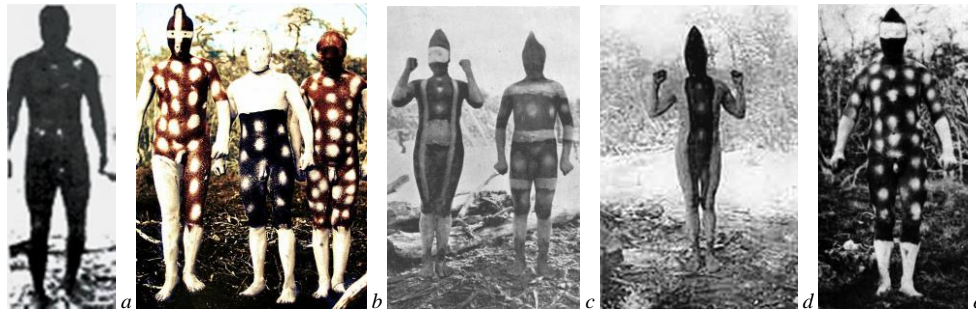
Indeed, the representations witnessed by Martin Gusinde and even before by Esteban Lucas Bridges have been important resources to know a part of the magical and religious world of the Selk’nam but yet, the solemn pantomimic observed by these ethnologists was nothing but a pale reflection of remote events that only with the passage of time became a myth and much later on, a ritual.

Who were those conic-head beings personated in the ceremonies? Who was Jálpen, Tanu, Sho’ort, Olum, Halaháches, Hóshtan, Mátan, Ulen or K’ternnen? How did the Selk’nam come to these precise representations? Who were the original models? It is not difficult to see that the origins of these representations go back to the age when the gods of the stars –the extraterrestrials– walked on Earth, *created* men and gave them the wisdom of fire and the knowledge of Nature.

The fragmentary echoes of that age were preserved in the traditional myths of the Selk’nam.



Left: Keyaisl and Yoisik, Sho’ort of the North and of the South, respectively. *Centre:* Talen, in the left, was one of the strongest Sho’ort of the North. In the right, one assistant of unknown name. *Right:* Pawus, Sho’ort of the North (Photos by Martin Gusinde, 1923).



a. Wacus, Sho'ort of the East. b. Sanu, at the left, Sho'ort of the West. Next to him there are two assistants. c, d. Assistants of a Sho'ort. e. Talen, Sho'ort of the North (Photos by Martin Gusinde, 1923).



Left: Tanu, the sister of Jálpen. Centre: The two horned sky god Halaháches, known also as Kótaix. Right: Ulen, the "Arrow-Spirit" (Photos by Martin Gusinde, 1923).



Representations of Mátan, a dancing spirit of the *Háin*, characterized by four different body paintings, each of them representing a *Sho'on* or heaven (Photos by Martin Gusinde, 1923).

Myth as the Hieroi Logoi

Well known anthropologists such as Edward Burnett Tylor, Max Müller or James G. Frazer have seen in the myths the irrational explanation of primitive people of Nature's phenomena and its laws which were considered as supernatural entities such as gods and spirits and from where primitive and mythical religions emerged.

As a result, the modern vision of the cosmogonic, teogonic and anthropogenic myths –determined by the decimononic Rationalism and the 20th century ideas of Evolutionism and the alleged concept of progress– has considered the myths as a

psychological and social function that can be explained by the primitive mental structure of men.

This tendency forgets, or rather ignores, that myth –*Mythoi*– is *Logos*, the “True Word”, a sacred narration, and therefore it implies the transmission of knowledge of ancient facts. As Mircea Eliade defined it, consequently, myth is *Hieroi Logoi*, the *Sacred Word*.



Was the conic headdress a reminiscence of the elongated-skull population found throughout America? a. A Yámana with conic mask in the ceremonial hat Kina (Photo by Martin Gusinde, 1923). b. Anthropomorphic figure found in the South of Chile of 350 mm height. It presents too a conical headdress (Museo Chileno de Arte Precolombino de Santiago). c. Elongated skull found in Tiahuanaco (Museo del Sitio Tiwanaku). d. Elongated skull found in December 2012 near Onavas, south of Sonora, in Mexico.

Certainly, myths are covered with symbolic, magical, social and ethical factors but in their core they contain a past reality, that is, real people and facts that only with the passage of time *became* mythical. The god-men and their wonders, inconceivable for modern mentality shaped in materialism and rationalism, were real and not the result of the primitive way of thinking or primal imagination. Their deeds came to be the foundational milestones of cultures and they became deified beings.

The struggle between women and men in the Selk’nam tradition –matriarchate against patriarchy– present as well in other austral cultures, was also a symbolic representation of the last world-wide catastrophe or *Deluge* that took place ± 12.900 years ago, which was codified in the *Háin* ceremony of the Selk’nam and the *Kina* of the Yámanas: It is the struggle between the lunar-female energies over the solar-male’s, both in the human and cosmic fields as it is explained in several myths.

Thus, following the ideas of Professor Roberto Rengifo in relation to the Antarctic origin of humankind, it is a fundamental task to deepen the knowledge of the ancient primitive cultures of Patagonia and Araucanía, such as the Selk’nam, the Haush (Manek’enk), Yámanas (Yáganes), Kawashkar (Alacalufes) and even of the Chonos, Tehuelches (Aonikenk) and Araucano-Mapuche, expressed in their sacred cosmogonic and anthropogenic myths, because these cultures kept practically until the conquest and colonial times of Chile –and to some extent, in southern Argentina–, the fragments of the traditions and symbols of the *Lituche* or *Glyche*, the survivors of the *Great Deluge*, the “first men” whose origins are traced to the Antarctic continent.

The Mystery of Antarctica

In an essay titled *Los chiles* (“The Chiles”, 1921) and in *El papel del territorio de Chile en la evolución de la humanidad prehistórica* (“The Role of the Territory of Chile in the Evolution of Prehistoric Humanity”, 1935) Professor Roberto Rengifo suggested the Antarctic origin of humankind. Such an extraordinary idea has been ignored by orthodox scholars and supporters of evolutionary and diffusionist theories. Indubitably, the ideas of Rengifo went and go against main stream history concerning the appearance of mankind and its migrations.

By that time, this is, the first decades of the 20th century, the multifaceted researcher Francisco P. Moreno stated in *Patagonia. Resto de un antiguo continente hoy sumergido* (In: *Anales de la Sociedad Científica Argentina* (1882) to have found the origins of humankind in Patagonia, the *Antarctic Zoogenic Centre*. And archaeologist Arthur Posnansky in his voluminous book *Tihuanacu: La cuna del hombre americano* (“Tiahuanaco: The Cradle of American Man”, 1945) proposed a similar idea. As a matter of fact, the original title of the book was *Tiahuanacu: Cuna de la humanidad* (“Tiahuanaco: The Cradle of Humankind”).

These authors –Moreno, Rengifo and Posnansky– found archaeological and cultural evidence of the great antiquity of American man which simply contravene the orthodox dogmas and its chronology.

Several scholars and researchers such as José Toribio Medina, Diego Barros Arana, Víctor Larco Herrera, Percy Harrison Fawcett, Belisario Díaz Romero, Adolph Bandelier and Edmund Kiss –along with Rengifo and Moreno– have recognized an older antiquity in Pre-Columbian cultures and civilizations which do not belong to any indigenous groups but to a primeval race.

In relation to the diluvial tradition, Rengifo wrote by 1935: *Since the appearance of the Homo sapiens the tradition does not record another great catastrophe than the Deluge. According to different nations that have preserved the memory of this event, most of them place it close to the appearance of man, which means that the first traditional record was the Deluge, the flood and the sinking of the lands. If the first humans lived in the Antarctic regions and from them come the oldest tradition it is then required that around them the catastrophe may have taken place and therefore, in the southern part of America. It was perhaps the sinking of the land that used to be around the South Pole and where I have stated that humankind appeared.*

Interesting enough, the Antarctic origin of humankind proposed by Rengifo finds an echo in the view of Professor Posnansky of the sunken continent of Atlantis. Posnansky stated in his 1919 essay *La Hora Futura* (“The Future Hour”) that *in the next catastrophe, the water of the oceans will go from South to North, covering a great part of Europe, Asia and the north part of America, discovering with this event in the south hemisphere again the legendary Atlantis, whose existence and disappearance has stated Plato, Homero, Diodoro from Sicily and others.*

In consequence, Posnansky was perhaps one the first authors to make the reference of Atlantis as Antarctic. Later on Professor Rengifo himself discovered a petroglyph in Nahuelbuta, in the South of Chile, identified as the *Palace of Poseidon, King of Atlantis*.

The Antarctic origins would partially explain the knowledge recorded in ancient maps –such as the maps of Francesco Rosselli (1508-1521), Piri Reis (1513), Lopo Homem (1519), Orontius Finaeus (1531), Giorgio Sideri Callapoda (1537), Gerard de Jode (1593), Matthias Quad (1600) and Phillippe Buache (1754)– that

show the geography of Antarctica before it was “discovered” in 1820 by Fabian Gottlieb von Bellingshausen and Mikhail Lazarev or one year later by John Davis.



The “famous Antarctic region” or land of the South Pole was referred by Alonso de Ercilla y Zúñiga. According to Professor Roberto Rengifo Antarctica was the cradle of mankind. Left: Detail of the map by Orontius Finaeus of 1531 where Antarctic appears as *Terra Avstralis*. Centre: Detail of the map of Gerard de Jode, *Hemispheri ab æquinoctiali linea, ad circvly poli Aatartitci* of 1593 in which appears a large continental land in the South Pole denominated as *Terra Australis Incognita*. Right: The 1600 map *Chica sive Patagonica et Australis Terra* of Matthias Quad. South to the Strait of Magellan appears Antarctica.

It might have been possible that Rengifo based his ideas about the Antarctic origin of mankind in the work of John Dalton Hooker who proposed by 1860 the existence in remote geological ages of a great polar continent that he called *Antartico*, which covered much of today’s surface of Antarctica, Patagonia, Australia and New Zealand. Also, Rengifo could have based his ideas in the studies of Moreno presented in the *Sociedad Científica de Argentina* (“Scientific Society of Argentina”) –which had its homologue in Santiago– but yet, the only quotation given by Rengifo are the following paragraphs of the Spanish soldier and *cronista* Alonso de Ercilla y Zúñiga in his work *La Araucana* (1569, 1578 and 1589) where he wrote:

*Chile, fértil provincia y señalada,
en la región antártica famosa,
de remotas naciones respetada,
por fuerte, principal y poderosa.*

[Chile, fertile and known land
in the famous Antarctic region
from ancient nations respected
because of being strong, important and
powerful].

From Antarctica, mankind reached Patagonia. According to Rengifo, from this primitive group, civilization spread from South to North first in South America, then reached North America and later on Europe and Asia.

The proofs of this remote civilization is traced in symbols and traditions but specially in the astronomical-megalithic constructions found in Patagonia –such as menhirs and dolmens– and in the Andean world which have no relation to the indigenous groups that populated the continent, millennia later, through the Behring Strait.

The Heritage of the Antarctic Civilization

After the *Great Catastrophe*, or as Rengifo pointed out, *the sinking of the lands that surrounded the South Pole from where the oldest tradition comes from*, the

survivors reached Patagonia. These survivors of the Deluge were the *Viracochas* or *White Gods* of Ancient America. Their continental starting point according to archaeologist Adolph Bandelier is found in Chiloé, in the same area that centuries later will be known as the *City of the Caesars* –la “*Ciudad de los Césares*”– whose last inhabitants were witnessed by Spanish explorers as for example the missionary Pedro de Angelis who in his *Derroteros y viages à la Ciudad Encantada, ó de los Césares* (“Paths and voyages to the Enchanted City, or of the Caesars”, 1836) described them as *very tall people, giant-like, so tall, that because of their size they cannot ride horses but walk*.

They were the remaining giants or *gigantes patagones* of Tierra del Fuego!

After the *New Age* or *New Sun* had begun, in the Andean highlands, this primitive group would become known as Viracocha or Huaracochas because of their knowledge of metallurgy. They raised a new culture and founded their magical-religious centre: Tiahuanaco, the *Metropolis of the Viracochas*.

Rafael Videla Eissmann



The Pre-Columbian iconography shows the migration of the Viracochas. a. The encounter of a European and a giant –or Viracocha– in Patagonia (Anonymous, 18th century). b. A 1871 illustration of a Patagonian (left) and a Fueguinian (right). According to Francisco P. Moreno, the Selk’nam or Ona is the Ahonnekenke of Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego is the last refuge of the authentic giant of the time of Magellan. c. A petroglyph at Chusmiza, in the Region of Tarapacá, in the North of Chile, which describes Huirajocha Tauapacac, this is, the Supreme Viracocha. d. A Yámana with a sacred feather headdress (Photo by Martin Gusinde, 1923). e. Huirajocha Tauapacac in the Sun Gate of Tiahuanaco, the Metropolis of the Viracochas.

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