

# ***Maausk*, the belief system of indigenous Estonians**

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**Introduction.** I wish everyone a happy new year, lots of joy and many interesting thoughts about the heritage of Estonians during the year 10 225, the year that just started for the people that subscribe to the belief system of indigenous Estonians.

Because we have many distinguished people in the audience who are fortunate enough to be married to an Estonian or at least know one, but do not speak Estonian, it is appropriate to start out with a note on translation of the subject of my presentation, known in Estonian as “*maausk*.” This may even be useful for many Estonians who fully understand all the words and terms associated with it, but have found it difficult to express these in English.

Then I will continue with briefly exploring the latest scientific research on the subject of religious belief and show some data on the religious affiliations, or more accurately, non-affiliation of Estonians, before I talk about the major aspects of *maausk*, its belief system, rituals, special days that are observed, and the specific tenets of *maausk*.

**A note on translation.** The word “*maausk*” is made up of the words “*maa*” and “*usk*.” “*Maa*” can mean land, country, nation, ground, soil, lot, rural, terra or distance, or in compound words, native. In this context I believe the word “native” is most appropriate. The word “*usk*” can be translated as faith, belief, credence, religion, persuasion or trust. The on-line Estonian-English dictionary translates *maausk* as “natural religion” and the web site of the followers of *maausk* translates it as “native religion.” An article in the British newspaper *The Guardian*, published last year, called it neo-paganism. I prefer to translate it with the rather clumsy term “the belief system of indigenous Estonians.”

During my presentation I will also use the word “*maarahvas*” which can be translated as either country folk or the people of the land. The believers in *maausk* call themselves *maarahvas* rather than Estonians. Even though some ancient geographers called the area occupied by Estonians Aesti, the words “Estonia” and “Estonians” were first introduced in 1800s. The ancient Estonians undoubtedly had names for their specific regions, many of which have survive to this day, but it is believed that generically they called their land “*maavald*,” roughly translated as “land state.” Presently *vald* is an administrative region similar to an American county.

**Why do we believe in the supernatural?** As we know there are many people who have, in varying degrees, religious beliefs and those who are, in varying degrees, skeptical of supernatural. For any serious discussion of any belief system, it seems

appropriate to also at least glance at the latest scientific research on the subject, even though, as we well know, this does not change anybody's mind about what they believe to be the ultimate truth.

The latest and best scientific research on the subject I have found indicates that religious belief has more to do with evolutionary adaptation of our brains than with philosophy or theology. There seems to be a strong correlation between the activity of the right-brain hemisphere and susceptibility to various improbable as well as religious beliefs. Dr. Michael Persinger, a neuroscientist at Laurentian University in Ontario, has been using what he calls the God Helmet, to stimulate mesiobasal temporal lobes of the brain. Appearances in several TV documentaries where participants reported a "sensed presence" brought public attention to this research tool. Persinger claims that at least 80 percent of his participants experience some mysterious presence beside themselves in the room. This "presence" ranges from a simple 'sensed presence' to visions of God. The God Helmet has received attention from the media and theologians because it appears to challenge traditional beliefs in God. Its findings have, as can be expected, been challenged.

Jesse Bering, an internationally recognized evolutionary psychologist, has tried to explain in his book *The Belief Instinct* why people believe in gods. Dr. Bering is the director of Cognition and Culture at Queen's University Belfast. He is also one of the principal investigators of the Explaining Religion Project and frequent contributor to the *Scientific American*.

He traces our desire to offer a supernatural explanation to natural disasters, our visions of afterlife, and our belief on how our moral or immoral behavior is rewarded or punished, to a single trait of human psychology. He calls it the theory of mind. Most scientists these days attribute reports of paranormal experiences to the same mechanisms of the brain that help us make decisions in daily life. According to the theory of mind, our ability and wish to guess the intentions and thoughts of other people gives us an evolutionary advantage. The evolutionary advantage stems from the fact that as humanoids developed language, they were able to tell their entire group about the good and the bad about individuals. Good behavior obviously earns group approval, status and rewards, whereas bad characters are shunned and punished. This eventually evolved to beliefs that the behavior of every individual is also monitored by otherworldly spirits or gods that can reward or punish us for our deeds not only here on earth but also after we are dead.

The theory of mind thus reinforces good behavior and altruism by rewarding individuals for the type of behavior that enables the group to survive. Most of us were told in our childhood that we better behave, if we want Santa Claus to bring us toys, implying that Santa is able to continuously track and remember the behavior of all the children in the world. As religions developed, the belief of all-knowing, other-worldly continuous monitoring of every individual's behavior was reinforced by our culture and educational systems. At various times in human history it was even enforced by more forceful persuasion.

For example, in the year 1600 the Dominican monk Giordano Bruno was tortured and burned at the stake by his fellow priests employed by the Inquisition for his heretical belief that stars in the sky were similar to our sun, and that the earth was not the center of the universe. He was just one of the 25 heretics tortured and burned that year. As late as 1921 John William Gott was prosecuted and sent to prison for blasphemy in Great Britain. We may not think it peculiar that in Pakistan the penalty for blasphemy is execution, but even in such civilized European countries as Austria, Denmark, Finland, Greece, Italy, Liechtenstein, the Netherlands, and San Marino, blasphemy is still a criminal offence. In the United States, the common law offences of blasphemy and blasphemous libel were abolished by the Criminal Justice and Immigration Act of 2008.

Evolutionary adaptation, as we know, is a process measured in thousands of years, and even though there has been a steady trend toward disbelief in the supernatural, we still occasionally get reports of the face of the Virgin Mary appearing in a grilled cheese sandwich or Mother Teresa in a cinnamon bun. Astrologers and soothsayers are still making a good living and at least in many Muslim countries religious doctrine is still strictly and rather cruelly enforced.

**Estonians, the unbelievers.** Estonians tend to be mostly unbelievers. According to the census of 2000, only 29 percent of the total population considered themselves as adherents of some conventional religion. Almost 14 percent of them were Lutherans and about 13 percent were Orthodox Catholics divided between what we usually call Greek orthodox and Russian orthodox. Even though official statistics claim that Russians make up about a third of Estonia's population, the true figure is by now more than 40 percent. Russians constitute by a large margin the orthodox population and they are considerably more religious than Estonians

A Eurobarometer poll in 2005 found that only 16 percent of the Estonian population believed in God.

There are several reasons why the vast majority of Estonians distrust Christianity. The most important seems to be the fact that in the thirteenth century Christianity was forced on Estonians, along with slavery, with sword and fire. Estonians fought against the Germanic well-armed religious order of the Brothers of the Sword for nearly a quarter of a century, but were finally subdued in 1227. There were later attempts to rally and throw off the oppressors, and Estonians for long time routinely kept washing off their forced baptism with water uncontaminated by the blessings of priests, but eventually the conquerors and the church prevailed.

Christianity did not become as strong a part of belief systems for Estonians as for most other European people, because the institutional religious life was dominated by foreigners until the early 20th century. Local priests, and after reformation, the pastors, were mostly Germans, who worked directly for the hated German landlords.

Half a century of Soviet occupation probably also played a role, but apparently not a major one. The Gallup polls conducted from 2006 and 2011 found that in Estonia 78 percent of the population stated that religion was not an important part of their

daily life. In Latvia and Roman Catholic Lithuania, who shared the fate of Estonia, the percentages are only 58 percent and 52 percent respectively. In Denmark, which has never suffered any religious persecution, it was 78 percent.

More important seem to be the relatively high educational level of Estonians and the general global trend toward disbelief in the supernatural. The strong inverse relationship between religious beliefs and educational level has been well established. Changes in attitudes and beliefs of even the Catholic Church are shown by the fact that Giordano Bruno and others tortured and killed by the Inquisition received a formal apology from Pope John Paul in March, 2000. This will undoubtedly get them transferred from infernal hell to the pearly gates of heaven. They certainly deserve some compensation for their 400 years of hellish sufferings.

**Traditional Culture.** The traditions of Estonians have been passed from generation to generation despite centuries of occupation and forcible imposition of the culture of the invaders. Some modern-day customs, beliefs, and attitudes, many of them reflected in Estonian language, attest to this. These days most people become interested in the traditional belief system by their conscious efforts, induced by the interest towards their ancestors' traditions and their own roots.

The knowledge of the indigenous belief system and traditions comes to a great extent from collections in various museums gathered during the last 150 years. Estonia has one of the world's largest folklore collections. During nationwide campaigns, started in the 19th century, millions of pages of the folk traditions reflecting the world view of the native religion were recorded. The national epic *Kalevipoeg*, compiled from folkloric materials collected in the first half of 19th century and published in full by Friedrich R. Kreutzberg in 1861, provides good data on traditions and belief systems. The data from the ancient chronicles and the earliest literature from outside sources have also contributed, mostly from Scandinavian countries and also from the chronicles of the occupiers.

**The genesis and evolution according to *maausk*.** The folklore of Estonians and other Uralic people tells us that it all started with a water bird. It does not explain who begat the bird, just like other religions do not explain who created the creator. From the eggs of this bird the world and everything that followed were born. Nature signifies something that is alive and is continuously evolving. Everything that exists and dwells is considered to be part of nature and to contain the spirit of nature - the stars, the sun, the earth, the moon, the elements, compounds and processes - water, fire.

Man is only one animated being among many others. On our earth, humans, as well as other creatures and inanimate objects have a common mother - the Earth. *Maarahvas* has for many thousands of years arisen from the Earth. Their efforts and the remains of the people have made the Earth fertile. According to *maausk*, all that is done to us is done to the Earth and all that is done to the Earth is done to us. Everyone and everything is in many ways connected to the Earth and nature. This sounds pretty much like the systems approach lectures I listened to when I pursued my master's degree in systems analysis.

**The essence of *maausk*.** A major aspect of *maausk* is nature worship which has evolved along with the traditional culture of Estonians since their ancestors inhabited their land some 10 000 years ago. The calendar starts with the birth of *Maavald*. This occurred when, at the end of the last ice age, the huge lake that had formed from melting ice, broke through its ice dam, drained into the Atlantic Ocean and exposed the land that became the home for Estonians. This event, known as the Billingen breakthrough, occurred according to latest carbon dating about 11600 years ago and most likely caused a mighty tsunami that hit the east coast of the American continent. New Year starts on 25th of December, which is known as *Jõulukuu*, right after the celebration of *Jõulud*, the holiday associated with the winter solstice. January is known as *Sydakuu*, the month of the heart.

**Annual cycle in the circle of time.** The movement of time is considered by *maausk* to be circular rather than lineal. Just as the dark winter is followed by the light and warmth of the summer, new life eternally compensates for death. In Estonia, unlike in Florida, changes in season bring great changes in temperature, vegetation and work associated with agriculture. The indigenous chronology reflects the changes in the nature during the annual cycle. The traditional festivals mark the focal points in the cyclical, eternal movement of nature. These are celebrated to remind the participants of the customs and traditions of ancestors and to cement family ties and friendships.

Significant breaking points of nature are designated by holidays and accompanied by appropriate customs. The four holidays that are considered the most important are the following:

- 1) Winter solstice, the end of souls' time and the beginning of the year on December 25th.
  - 2) *Munapyhad*, literally egg fest, also known as *suvisted*. Although the word is derived *suvi*, which means summer, *suvisted* denotes the beginning of summer or spring.
  - 3) *Leedopäev* summer solstice, on June 23th.
  - 4) *Kasupäev*, which marks the beginning of the winter half-year and the beginning of the souls' time, on September 29th.
- In all 31 fest days are celebrated.

One very ancient tradition of indigenous Estonians that has survived intact into modern times and remains widely celebrated by Estonians is the *Jaanituli* (Jaan's fire) bonfire at summer solstice. The bonfires can be seen throughout the entire country and are accompanied by folk dancing, games, rituals and traditions associated with these.

**Life cycle and ancestors in the cycle of time.** Births, weddings and burials are the most important focal points in people's life cycle. The customs and rituals observed on those occasions contribute to harmony within community and nature, contribute to the enjoyment of life for the living and assure reverent remembrance of those who have passed to the other side of the Toonela. Toonela River, known as Styx by the ancient Greeks, forms the boundary between the earth and the underworld. The dead relatives are believed to come back to visit us on certain festivals. They remain in

the thoughts of the living. Modern-day social scientists have defined culture as knowledge in motion. For adherents of *maausk*, the wisdom of ancestors is part of the traditional culture that helps them to live a better, more meaningful life. Their memories provide solace in time of grief.

**Shrines.** Shrines are the sanctuaries of *maarahvas*. These are places that have been sacred for many generations. A shrine is a location which may have ancient trees, glacial boulders, bodies of water or unique plants. There may be a swing, fireplace, *sauna* and a log storage shed at the shrine. People go to various shrines during important festivals or other important occasions, to establish harmony with nature, experience peace and gather strength for life's challenges.

Before going to the shrine, body and mind must be purified. Negative feelings and bad thoughts must be left behind. In the shrine people must accentuate the positive. It is a no-no to be drunk, commit any act of cruelty or even break twigs or to gather plants. Bad things are said to happen to people who break the rules.

The trees of the shrine, as all trees, are considered to contain the spirit of the earth. As people of other religions talk to saints or divinities, individuals of *maarahvas* relate their concerns to ancient oaks, near sacred springs, lakes or glacial boulders. All of these are treated with reverence. There are even tales of sacred lakes drying up, because they were not treated with proper respect. Ten years ago, in the year 10215, a lake dried up in northern Estonia after it was apparently inexpertly deepened. This incident obviously reinforced the belief of *maarahvas* that nature should be respected and treated with reverence.

The reverence for nature and vocal protection of historical sacred groves has given a positive image to the revival of *maausk*, the Estonia indigenous belief system. It almost seems that the modern-day environmentalist, the greens, and the so-called tree-huggers have learned a great deal from ancient Estonians and have adopted many of their beliefs.

Estonian indigenous belief system is somewhat similar to the relationship to nature by the dominant humanoid species on Pandora in the award-winning movie *Avatar*, written and directed by James Cameron. In a science-fiction movie where one can mix human and alien DNA to create avatars, and transfer consciousness from one body to another, a direct connection by the dominant species to sentient animals and vegetation can be accepted. There may be some Estonians who actually believe that spirits inhabit trees and glacial rocks, but these do not constitute a significant proportion of the followers of *maausk*. Rather, it is a worldview, a tradition, and a way of life which is intertwined with nature on an intellectual level and forms a cultural and linguistic entity. In its specific form it is unique to Estonia.

Harmonious relations, as we well know, are positive and tend to be durable. According to the dictates of *maausk*, relations must not be abused or misused. Most interpersonal relations must necessarily stay superficial, but more important ones must be cultivated and strengthened.

The capability of forming harmonious relations grows with maturity for both individuals and cultures. Living in harmony with each other, with nature and with their ancestral culture enabled *maarahvas* to live for thousands of years and survive even during difficult times. It provides hope for the future.

**The joys of ancient customs and beliefs.** One of the most pleasant tenets of *maausk* is that it and the life of people must be *mõnus*, best translated as enjoyable. *Maarahvas* believes in the active pursuit of *mõnu* (enjoyment), which is similar to the idea of pursuit of happiness for Americans. *Mõnu* is the cumulative effect of all the conditions and circumstances that enable us to live in the most enjoyable and harmonious way possible. If we want our lives to be *mõnus*, we must be in harmonious relations with not just other people but also with our ancestors and the nature that surrounds us, dictates *maausk*. Healthy food, harmonious environment and other natural things belong to this kind of life-style. Even the traditional Saturday night's enjoyment of a nice *sauna* with one's friends, and the cold beer that goes with it.

All of us who are gathered here, travelled to sunny Florida, to this wonderful KLENK, from several countries, many states and cities, to meet old friends and make new ones. Here we have experienced the kind of *mõnu* that the indigenous belief system of ancient Estonians advises us to pursue. It seems that the spirit that pervades the earth, the spirit that gave comfort to our ancestors, is also at work in this group of modern Estonians. I believe I am joined by all of you in the wish that all of us could enjoy the *mõnu* of many future KLENKs. Most of all we wish that we can pass this peculiar American-Estonian tradition to our children and to many future generations.

# Acknowledgement, Sources and Notes

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## Notes

**International efforts to preserve traditional culture.** There are significant on-going international efforts to preserve and foster traditions such as *maausk*. Within the World Commission on Protected Areas of the World Conservation Union, the Specialist Group on the Cultural and Spiritual Values of Protected Areas seeks to investigate the interface between humanity and nature, to promote the integrated management of the natural and cultural heritage and to harmonize cultural and spiritual aspirations with the conservation of nature.

In this context the Delos Initiative focuses on the sacred natural sites in developed countries throughout the world, such as Australia, Canada, and the European countries, Japan, New Zealand and the United States of America. Its main purpose is to help in maintaining both the sanctity and the biodiversity of these sites, through the understanding of the complex relationship between spiritual/cultural and natural values.

### Traditional names of months

Sydakuu – January

Radokuu – February

Urbekuu - March

Mahlakuu - April

Lehekuu - May

Pärnakuu - June

Heinakuu - July

Põimukuu (lõikuskuu) - August

Sygiskuu - September

Porikuu - October

Kooljakuu - November

Jõulukuu – December

### Pyhad – festive days

Korjusepäev (14.01.)

Taliharjapäev (17.01)

Pudrupäev (02.02.)

Luuvalupäev (09.02.)

Kihlakud (05.02.-07.03)

Eidepäev

Sirgupaev (09.03.)

Kevadine pööripäev (20.-21.03)

Marjapunapäev (25.03.)

Urbepäev (17.03 - 20.04.)

Vaikne nädal (17.03.-23.04.)

Kynnipäev (14.04)

Munapyha (22.03.-26.04.)

Karjalaskepäev (23.04)

Maahengaus (01.-31.05)

Ligupäev (09.05)

Suvisted

Suured Päevad (21.-24.06.)

Esimene rukkiemapäev (10.08.)

Suur rukkiemapäev (15.08.)

Viimane rukkiemapäev (24.08.)

Heinaleedo (02.07)

Karusepäev (13.07)

Jaakapäev (25.07.)

Jakepäev (29.07)

Peko pyha (09.)

Ussi urguminemise päev (08.09.)

Sygisene pööripäev (22.-23.09)

Kasupäev (29.09)

Kolletamispäev (14.10.)

Hingedeaeg

Haneõhtu ja lamba emapäev

(24./25.11.)

Mardipäev (10.11.)

Jõulud