

## The Aurora and Its Fantastic Indigenous Interpretations

*by Moki Kokoris*



Although relatively few of us have had the privilege of watching the shimmering curtains of light sweep across dark polar skies, we all know that there is something quite mystifying about the aurora. Throughout the ages, people have wondered where it comes from, what makes its veils dance and swirl, and what its meaning could be. The ethereal undulations have evoked both awe and fear, oftentimes kindling stories with occult characteristics. Yet, as spellbinding as aurora legends of distant cultures have been since ancient times, the scientific explanation for the lights adds even more intrigue to this phenomenon.

The aurora is ever present day and night, summer and winter, shaped by our planet's magnetic field, powered by particles from the Sun, and colored by various gases of the upper atmosphere that create its palette of hues. Seen from outer space, the aurora reveals itself as two broken rings of light that hover over the polar regions of Earth. The lights appear simultaneously in both the northern and southern hemispheres; the aurora borealis in the Arctic, the aurora australis over Antarctica, their synchronous performances mainly for the enjoyment of polar bears and penguins respectively.

So, what are the lights telling us about the mysterious stardust universe in which we live? Carl Sagan characterized them as “a detour from reality.” Scientists, however, were not the first to notice the aurora. In addition to early explorers such as Nansen and Cook, ancient peoples gazed up at the night skies and saw in them ceremonial journeys of angels, departed ancestors, supernatural creatures and children yet unborn. Others saw the lights as harbingers of evil or divine warnings that foretold calamity and bloodshed. Some cultures believed the aurora could be invoked as a healing spirit for their shamans.

Because the aurora can be as alien as it is wondrous, throughout countless millennia, our ancestors created their own interpretations of its meaning. The Inuit of Alaska described the lights as the dancing souls of their favorite animals: caribou, seals, salmon and beluga whales. The tribes of Finnmark believed they were “fire foxes” that lit up the sky with sparks that flew from their glistening coats. To the Scots and Swedes they were merry dancers while to the people of the Hebrides they appeared to be shining fairies. The Finns used to say “the women of the North are hovering in the air,” and the Saami of Sweden thought of them as “girls running around the fireplace dragging their pants.”

The Chuvash people of central Asia identified the lights as Suratan-tura (birth-giving heaven), the deity called upon to ease women through labor pains. Lakota Sioux thought the lights might be spirits of future generations waiting to be born, and many Japanese honeymooners to this day visit northern Canada believing that children conceived under the spell of the lights will be more fortunate. Fishermen of Scandinavia still look on the lights as an omen of abundance, interpreting them as sunshine reflecting off large schools of herring in the northern seas.

To the many circumpolar indigenous peoples, be it the Inuit of Canada and Greenland, the Saami of Scandinavia and Russia or the other ethnic groups in Siberia, the northern lights are the souls of those who died through loss of blood, whether in childbirth, by suicide or through murder. Having risen to the frozen snowfields in the night sky, these spirits dash around playing a macabre game of soccer, sometimes using a walrus skull as the ball.

Such is the supernatural power of the aurora, capable of inspiring some of the most fantastic interpretations that take ordinary people to the farthest edges of their beliefs. Whether it appears to us as an enigmatic ancestral dance, a most beautiful night sky painting or a beguiling mystery, the aurora demonstrates the dynamic link between ourselves and the cosmos beyond.