

BEAR IN HUMAN IMAGINATION AND IN RITUAL

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Abstract: The place and significance of the bear image (related to *Ursus* spp.) in the worldview of the peoples inhabiting the northern hemisphere, Eurasia and North America, has been long recognized. In the U.S., Paul Shepard and Barry Sanders recently examined (1985) the bear representation, primarily in myth and literature, from an historical and ecological perspective. In 1926, U.S. anthropologist A.I. Hallowell examined the role of bear ceremonialism cross-culturally. Unfortunately, he had little access to the work of Russian anthropologists who studied bear rituals in a great variety of cultural settings from Sakhalin to Lapland. Also, data on Ainu bear ceremonialism were relatively meager in Hallowell's time. Many new data have been accumulated both in Japan and in Russia by anthropologists since Hallowell published his seminal article. New data also have been collected from indigenous peoples of the North American forest belt. I examine the differential meanings ascribed to the bear in light of new data and with modern methods of analysis of symbolic systems.

Ursus 10:343-347

Key words: bear, belief system, mediator, ritual, sacrifice.

EDITORIAL PREFACE

Readers as inexperienced as I am in the literature of anthropology and theology may find that some introduction is helpful before reading Lydia Black's discussion of *Bear* in ritual. She focuses principally on the circum-polar North, a region which includes many diverse peoples with group-specific worldviews. These worldviews and conceptualizations of the structure and functioning of the world are likely to be as different from ours as they are real to these people.

I suggest that you set strict biology aside a moment and attempt to conceive of worldviews that have as a focal point the *Bear image* (syn *Bear*). Note that *Bear* includes both physical and spiritual components and emphasis changes with context. These worldviews also may allow boundary crossings between spiritual and non-spiritual worlds.

I found Turner (1973) cited by Black worth reading. Turner's entire, but relatively brief, discussion illustrates some of the potential of rituals and symbols with respect to objectification of interrelationships and multiple meanings. Context is paramount! Complexity, multiplicity, variability, and process are characteristics of spirituality as well as of biology. I hope Black's discussion opens some new doors and provides food for thought.

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I am most grateful to E.A. Alekseenko for putting at my disposal the manuscript of her as yet unpublished work on bear rituals and concepts among the Ket and to E.P. Bat'ianova for sharing verbally the results of her recent field investigations into the beliefs associated with bears among the Koryak of northern Kamchatka. I regret that the format of this paper did not permit me to list all the fine contributions to the bear lore by a number of Rus-

sian scholars, my teachers and colleagues, many of whom are now dead, among them E.A. Kreinovich.

DISCUSSION

Since Paleolithic times, most ursids have been a source of potent ritual symbols among all the peoples inhabiting the vast areas of Eurasia and North America in which bears are found. In an overwhelming majority of cases, the bear is a sacrificial animal. The killing of a bear is considered an offering by which humans communicate with the nonhuman, spiritual domain. At the same time, it is considered that a bear, by permitting itself to be killed, is an offering from the realm of the spiritual, by which communication between the wholly other domain of the deities and humans is maintained. The bear is a voluntary sacrifice, offering itself to and for humans, at the same time humans offer it up for return to the realm of the deities and the benevolent ancestors.

Bear symbolism is extremely complex. Insight into that complexity requires in-depth study of the worldview of a given society, of the cultural context in which particular usages and symbolic meanings manifest themselves, and cross-cultural comparisons. Cross-cultural comparisons are important in understanding the remarkable similarities, concordances, and even identicalness of symbolic concepts and ritual usages associated with *Ursus* spp.

Man's interpretations, conceptualizations, and cosmological models of the environment are communicated to others and transmitted from generation to generation. They are constantly evolving, restated, reinforced, and reformulated in myth and ritual. Ritual is considered to be the more potent symbolic communicative system, as it engages a multiplicity of senses to a much greater degree than recounting of myths. I focus on the most likely rea-

sons for the choice of *Ursus* as a symbolic vehicle and offer some thoughts on possible reasons for the similarities in conceptualization of the bear found in societies widely separated in space and time.

Early humans were foragers and hunters, and we may safely assume that they formulated concepts defining the relationship between predator and prey, though not all prey animals were considered equal. Such conceptualizations were almost certainly integrated in the overall concept of the order of things, the cosmology and cosmogony of the universe, as well as "with a 'mathematics' of sociocultural experience rather than with a mathematics of logical relationships" (Turner 1973:1101). Further, with the exception of the scientific worldview originating in post-Renaissance Western Europe, humanity conceptualizes the cosmos as a unity. Often this so-called "unitary universe" is erroneously interpreted by Westerners as a uniformitarian phenomenon, that is the world of humans, animals, and spirits are thought to be alike and of the same order of reality. In fact, among most people on earth the concept entails a number of distinct "realities," "worlds" or "domains" of different order, with clearly defined boundaries. These domains, however, stand in an ordered relationship to each other, the whole "living" in a universal harmony. This harmony persists as long as all beings believed to inhabit the cosmos follow prescribed rules and maintain orderly communication between the separate domains (Fienup-Riordan 1994).

Conceptually, the earthly temporal domain of humans is sharply distinguished from nonhuman domains. The latter include the domain of animals, the physical environment, the bush, the forest, the mountain, the sea and the sky, the world of nature, and the spirits inhabiting the cosmos. But the two worlds or realities are in relationship to each other, which is, however, subject to disturbance or severance. The inhabitants of both domains are responsible for the maintenance of this relationship. Moreover, the relationships between the denizens of human and nonhuman domains are conceptualized as based on the principle of reciprocity: behavior of each category of beings affects and evokes appropriate response from the other category or categories. Hence, the relationship might be endangered by improper actions of either but, once broken or violated, may be restored, usually by the performance of ritually prescribed actions (see discussion of the "rogue bear," below).

Nonhuman domains are multiple. Despite Claude Levi-Strauss' stress on duality, the opposition of culture and nature (see, for example, Levi-Strauss 1963), some non-human domains are accessible to humans directly, while others are accessible indirectly through divinely elected

human beings (prophets, shamans, some priests), or indirectly through a domain which is in-between. The animal world is conceptualized as such a third or mediating world. The wholly other domain of deities and spirits is seen as relating directly to the earthly nonhuman domain of wilderness, and consequently to animals, but only indirectly to the human domain, through the mediation of this third or animal world. Animals, as Levi-Strauss (1963) postulates, are good to think with. They serve to reconcile in parsimonious fashion disparate, even contradictory, themes (Turner 1973). Animals, as a rule, are conceptualized as partaking of the domain of the spirits and deities, and of the world of the humans. Also, they are simultaneously of the world of the living and the dead. They are conceptualized as partaking to greater or lesser extent of the qualities characteristic of both, humans and mortality, spirits and immortality. Animals are then bridges between wholly other domains of humanity and divinity. They can step into and out of either. Through them, boundaries between worlds can be crossed. The actual mechanisms which accomplish transitions or passages from one domain to the other are conceptualized as *death, birth, and sexual congress*. (Hence the multitude of stories found throughout the area where bear beliefs persist of bears kidnapping or inciting women to join them as lovers or wives, bear child births to women, etc., and the transformation of a bear into a human or a human transformed into a bear and once again into human form through the act of killing.) Transformation of a spirit or divinity by assumption of an animal form in order to directly touch upon the human domain is also a basic concept.

However, as George Orwell remarked, "all animals are equal but some are more equal than others," (1954:148). Not all animals are conceptualized as boundary-crossing beings. Underlying all cosmologies is the assumption of a power external to humanity which, under normal circumstances, is not amenable to human manipulation or control. Therefore, as a rule, it is an exceptional animal which is selected for the role of a boundary-crosser, the mediator between disparate worlds, and the personification of nonhuman power, the power of life and death, of abundance and scarcity: the Whale, the Lion, the Jaguar, the Snake, the Eagle, and in our case the Bear. As personifications of the power or powers of the universe, such animals are often appealed to and appropriated as their own by the ritual specialists who manipulate such power(s) for human ends: in many cases the shamans. They are also often appropriated by warriors and hunters as their own special symbols, guardian and empowering spirits, and pro-

tectors. A powerful or unusual animal is even more likely to be thought of as a boundary-crossing being if it is believed to share some characteristics with humans as well as animals. Bear is a case in point. It is believed to resemble humans anatomically; it is, like humans, omnivorous; it can move on its hind legs and use its fore paws somewhat like humans; it constructs a lair, a "house," a dwelling (hence burrowing animals are often used as bear substitutes). A bear sow is believed to give birth to a single cub or pair of cubs; it is believed that she does not have litters. Therefore, in many societies in the area of distribution of bear cults or bear veneration, the birth of twins is *prima facie* evidence of sexual congress between a human female and a bear. On the other hand, a bear possesses clearly animal characteristics. Hence, it belongs, or is capable of acting, in both worlds.

Such animals are religious symbols which exhibit the properties of condensation, unification of disparate referents, and polarization of meanings (Turner 1973). In the literature, such dominant symbols are referred to as key symbols, subdivided sometimes into elaborating and summarizing symbols (Ortner 1973), and as dominant and condensation symbols (Turner 1973). "Dominant symbols provide the fixed points of the total system and recur in many of its component rituals," and condensation symbols concentrate many meanings in a single symbol: "many things and actions are represented in a single formation" (Turner 1973:1100–1101). An elaborating symbol, according to Ortner (1973:1388–1339), "is accorded wide-ranging applicability in the culture—played in many contexts, or applied to many different sets of forms—is generally not only formally apt but is also substantively referential to high level values, ideas, cognitive assertions..." while a "summarizing symbol may play important ordering functions, as when they relate the respondent not merely to a cluster of high level assumptions and values, but to a particular scenario which may be replayed in ongoing life." Thus, it is futile to look for a single meaning for such a symbol, because these symbols speak simultaneously in many voices and appeal to humans on several levels of experience. Bear as a symbol is a case in point. The bear stands simultaneously as unity and multiplicity: a single dominant image exhibiting many facets at the same time. In Christianity, the concept of the Trinity is of the same order: multiple but indivisible.

Among the Ket of the Yenisei River valley (Russia), Bear is clearly conceptualized as a mediator between the human and spirit worlds and as mediator between life and death, a link between ancestor–descendent

(Alekseenko In Press). He may be a hypostasis of the Master of the Mountain–Forest (as he is clearly conceptualized among the Nivkh and Ainu of the Eurasian Far East where the bear simultaneously stands for benevolent ancestors as well as for the Master of the Mountain–Forest), giver of game and Master of Animals, and thus master of life. In this capacity, Bear may be bisexual, or either male or female; he may in a given case be a reincarnation of a person recently dead (the actual persona is established by divination when the paw of a slain bear is tossed so as to fall on the carcass). Bear may be a symbol of all ancestors collectively. Bear may be considered a transformed human, or a human infant a transformed bear. The birth of a son, in some circumstances, or twins of the same or both sexes may be interpreted as a result of copulation of a human female with a bear in a dream.

Bear may cross the boundary to establish specific kinship links with humans. When orphaned cubs are found and raised by humans, the foster parents and foster siblings are believed to form an immutable bonding with bears and particularly with the bear raised and released. Among the Ket, such a bear is marked by metal ornaments which he displays to hunters who then avoid killing a "kinsman." Because Bear wants to visit humans, he offers himself to hunters. When killed, Bear is an honored guest and this is reflected in the ritual treatment of the bear carcass.

The above demonstrates the multivocality of Bear as a symbolic vehicle among the Ket. Such multivocality is characteristic of all cultures where Bear is a dominant, key symbol. Naturally, there are culture-specific as well as local variations, and different hypostases and aspects may be stressed in different societies. Differences arise over time, as bear symbolism is reinterpreted in new ecological situations or when influences, usages and ideas emanating from other societies are incorporated into an existing context. Nevertheless, remarkable similarities and correspondences are noted cross-culturally. As Leo Frobenius noted in 1902, "All culture always is infinitely variable, but also persistent" (Paproth 1976:27). Current consensus is that beliefs about and rituals focused on the bear, no matter how varied today, ultimately stem from an ancient common ideology generated among early hunters of Eurasia.

There are many in-depth studies of bear symbolism, especially studies of rituals in which the bear figures prominently. Most studies by Russian and European scholars, including Alekseenko (In Press) and Paproth (1976), focus on the bear symbolism of Siberian populations. In Japan, Ainu bear ceremonialism has been

studied extensively (Paproth [1976:333–360] provides an excellent bibliography). In North America, to my knowledge, no such studies have been undertaken by anthropologists since my doctoral dissertation (Black 1973) which contains an analysis of bear ritual among the Nivkh of the Lower Amur River Basin and Sakhalin Island in Russia. Scholarly cross-cultural comparisons, and analysis of similarities and concordances, on the other hand, are even rarer, though popular interest in such comparisons is widespread and several publications exist (Shepard and Sanders 1985, Rockwell 1991). Scholarly works focused on cross-cultural comparisons include the pioneering work of Hallowell (1926), Ivanov (1937), and a short paper by Vasil'iev (1948). Unfortunately, Vasil'iev's more extensive work on the same topic (1946) remains unpublished. Hallowell (1926), Vasil'iev (1948), Paproth (1976), and Alekseenko (In Press) all conclude that similarities in belief derive from common origin, while differences are accounted for through reinterpretation in local ecological conditions, specific historical circumstances, diffusion of concepts from other areas and reinterpretation, erasure of some aspects under new historical conditions, and emergence of new forms in the process of cultural revitalization (necessarily coupled with reinterpretation).

Features that appear universally according to Vasil'ev (1948) and Paproth (1976) are:

1. prohibitions of direct reference to Bear by the general proper names,
2. use of circumlocutions in referring to or addressing the bear,
3. ritual preparation for, conduct of, conclusion of, and return from the hunt,
4. ceremonial address to the bear prior to killing as well as to the carcass during and after the hunt and at the feasts,
5. exclusion of women in all matters concerning bears, mostly total, but always at least partial (in some societies women are permitted to eat certain selected parts of the carcass, not commonly cooked, and very occasionally the use of bear parts by women ritual specialists is allowed),
6. ceremonial skinning and dressing of the bear,
7. ceremonial treatment of the slain bear and special removal and eating or disposal of eyes and other sensory organs, especially the skin of the nose, as well as sexual parts, male and female,
8. central ritual significance accorded the head (skull),
9. ritual preparation of bear meat,
10. ritual preservation of the head, skull, bones, skin,
11. association, as mentioned, with power and hence with ritual specialists and/or warriors, though shamans, unless they are also elders and leaders, are as a rule excluded from communal bear rituals,
12. transformation of bear to human and human to bear (by means of sex, death, birth),
13. association of bear with the earth, often linked to metal, a burrow and hence substitution for bear and association with the bear of other burrowing animals: mice, moles, ground squirrels, etc.,
14. treatment of bear hunts as ritual.

Hunting of bears is not equated with hunting other animals, but represents a complex ritual. One may identify phases of this ritual by the following:

1. discovery of the den and encounter with a bear in the forest or tundra,
2. preparation for the hunt of the special weapons and hunter's or hunters' person(s),
3. addressing the bear prior to slaying,
4. addressing the slain bear,
5. removal of eyes, nose, lips and/or tongue,
6. quartering and skinning,
7. distribution and ritual consumption of bear meat (certain persons allocated particular portions by age, sex and status),
8. disposal of bones and particularly of the skull.

None of these actions can be understood in any meaningful context without reference to the cardinal principles of the belief and value systems of the particular people. Fundamental to all is the concept that the bear elects to visit humans, to become their guest, and thus gives himself to the hunter. A hunter may not refuse to hunt and kill the bear who has given him a sign. Also fundamental is the concept that through the killing, either in the hunt or in specific ritual, the bear is set free to return to the wholly other domain and resume its eternal existence in a different dimension. Once there it will reproduce and reward the humans by other offerings of his kind to be killed. In this sense, the bear hunt culminates, in western terms, in a sacrifice.

Finally, we consider the concept of the "rogue bear." The rogue bear violates the principle of benevolent reciprocity existing between the human and nonhuman domains by attacking, sometimes killing, a human. As far as I know, in such cases the bear is considered to be possessed by evil and is then killed without the usual rites and ceremonies. Among the Nivkh such a bear is defiled, insulted, spat upon, and his remains are disposed of in a deliberately contemptuous manner. Among the Dena'ina of the Kenai Peninsula of Alaska we know of a case in which such a bear was believed to be a trans-

formed enemy shaman and was killed with bullets sprinkled with holy water and kept overnight on the altar of the Orthodox chapel (Kalifornsky 1982, 1991:287-307). This case is an excellent illustration of syncretism which influences local development and reinterpretation of ancient beliefs.

The bear rites of the Ainu, the Nivkh, and several Southern Tungusic-speaking groups, while sharing common ground with other bear venerating rites, are distinguished by the fact that a bear cub is "domesticated," that is, brought up in the human domain, in the village, tended by women, specifically to be sacrificed at a communal feast. These spectacular rites, knowledge of which is current and occasionally practiced among the peoples of the Amur region, Sakhalin, Hokkaido, and the former southern Kuriles, apparently were also present in antiquity in northern Japan and possibly China. In these rites, bear cubs reared to maturity are sacrificed in an elaborate ceremonial sequence as a last concluding rite in the funerary ceremonies for a kinsman, and simultaneously as an offering to the Master of the Mountain-Forest and return of the bear to the spiritual domain. Among the Ainu, communion with the Master of the Mountain-Forest is stressed. Among the Nivkh, linkage to benevolent ancestors is also stressed. In all societies which practice this type of bear ritual the link of the spiritual and the human is evident through the blessing of the human habitation by the bear. The animal, before being sacrificed, is conducted to every dwelling in the settlement, ceremoniously fed, bade farewell, often with elaborate signs of affection, decorated with sacred shavings of wood (*inau*). Finally, Bear is slaughtered at a sacred tree with arrows from bows by men specially selected for this honorable duty.

Specialists consider these last-mentioned forms of bear ritual to represent a blending of the ancient Paleolithic traditions of the Eurasian and American North with traditions of Southeast Asia. Proponents of this view (Ivanov 1937, Vasil'iev 1948, Paproth 1976) point to the fact that these rituals are superimposed on or combined with the bear hunt ritual characteristic of the entire area in which bear ceremonialism occurred. In United States and Canadian anthropology, no attention has been paid to bear ceremonialism in cross-cultural perspective since Hallowell's preliminary study in 1926. We know much less about the significance of *Ursus* as a symbolic vehicle among Native Americans than about the customs of the peoples of Eurasia. While most specialists reject independent and convergent emergence of identical or strikingly similar complex structures, the question of a single origin and diversification, linkages, or diffusion, remains an unresolved challenge.

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