HOKKAIDO UNIVERSITY

Title	Tracing the Bear Myth in Northeast Asia
Author(s)	Janhunen, Juha
Citation	Acta Slavica Iaponica, 20, 1-24
Issue Date	2003
Doc URL	https://hdl.handle.net/2115/39417
Type	departmental bulletin paper
File Information	ASI20_001.pdf

Hokkaido University Collection of Scholarly and Academic Papers : HUSCAP

Tracing the Bear Myth in Northeast Asia[1]

Juha Janhunen

All over the northern boreal zone of the globe, the bear is widely respected as the Lord of the Animals, which in some important respects differs from all other wild beasts. The reasons behind the special position of the bear are multiple. Most importantly, the bear has some unique and well-known human-like characteristics, including its size, skeletal structure, footprint, ability to stand in a bipedal position, dietary habits, and its annual life cycle, involving hibernation in a specially built den. Although other mammals possess some of these features, their most perfect combination is materialized in the bear. Not surprisingly, human societies in the boreal zone apparently very early developed the idea that the bear is actually a human, clad in bearskin.[2]

Another circumstance supporting the special status of the bear is its relatively rare – but not exceedingly rare – occurrence. Although potentially dangerous to humans, the bear is traditionally not regarded as a harmful beast, but rather, as a competing hunter, who, if let alone, will not spoil the human hunter's chances. The inherent human sympathy towards the bear has not been substantially diminished even by the introduction of secondary activities such as cattle or reindeer breeding, for the harm done by the bear to the herds is generally negligible in comparison with that caused by real enemies such as the wolf and the wolverine. The only large carnivore comparable in its habits to the bear is the tiger, and indeed, in those regions where the tiger occurs it is revered on a par with the bear.[3] Nevertheless, the conceptual framework connected

1 This paper was completed during the author's stay at the Slavic Research Center of Hokkaido University, Sapporo. The author acknowledges the kind help received from the staff at the Center, as well as at the specialized libraries of Hoppou Shiryoushitsu and Hoppou Bunkaron. Special thanks for both valuable scholarly advice and practical help are due to Koichi Inoue.

2 For a general introduction to the role of the bear in the mythology of the boreal peoples, see: Carl-Martin Edsman, "Bears," in Mircea Eliade, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Religion* 2 (New York: Macmillan, 1987), pp. 86-89; Hans-Joachim Paproth, *Studien über das Bärenzeremoniell. I. Bärenjagdriten und Bärenfeste bei den tungusischen Völkern* (Uppsala: Skrifter utgivna av Religionshistoriska institutionen i Uppsala, 1976). The species most typically representing the Bear amongst the boreal peoples is the Eurasian brown bear (*Ursus arctos*), but other species, notably the North American grizzly (*U. horribilis*), the Himalayan black bear (*U. tibetanus*), and the polar bear (*U. maritimus*), are known to have been connected with similar mythological conceptions.

3 As a possible linguistic reflex of the equipollent relation between the bear and the tiger, the Korean names of the two animals may be cited: *gom* 'bear' vs. *beom* 'tiger,' apparently to be

with the bear is both geographically wider and structurally more elaborate than that connected with the tiger.[4]

Due to their relatively small and sparse populations, bears have apparently never been hunted as a primary source of subsistence. It is true that certain parts of the bear, notably the skin and the meat, have an inherent utilitarian value, while certain other parts, including the paws, claws, teeth, and gallbladder are considered useful because of the magic properties attributed to them.[5] Since such products also have an exchange value outside of the boreal zone, a killed bear is, even today, a source of income to the hunter and his community. Even so, the ultimate reasons behind bear hunting must be sought elsewhere. One reason is that the bear offers a challenge to the hunter, allowing him to prove his skill. However, of much greater importance is the mythological dimension of the bear.

The Bear Cult

The mythological role of the bear is manifested in the complexity of beliefs and practices known as the Circumpolar Bear Cult which has been occasionally traced back to the Palaeolithic hunting societies of the latest glacial period.[6] In

---

segmented as *go.m* and *beo.m*, respectively. It is probably not irrelevant in this context that Korea, with the adjacent parts of Maritime Manchuria, is a region where a relatively sizeable human population has since ancient times been in contact with both the bear and the tiger. The fact that the Korean word for 'bear' has a cognate in Japanese (*ku.ma*) does not invalidate the proposed segmentation. Since, however, the Japanese cognate may have an internal etymology (connected with *ku.ro* 'black'), it is possible that both words are actually Japonic borrowings in Pre-Proto-Koreanic.

4 Shirokogoroff discusses the relationship between man, bear, and tiger, with special reference to the Tungus (Ewenki). According to him, the Tungus think that the tiger and the bear have a similar right to hunting territories of their own as the Tungus hunter has. As long as the hunter does not interfere with the territorial interests of the tiger and the bear, these animals will not harm him. Interestingly, and somewhat unexpectedly, Shirokogoroff notes that the Tungus generally consider the tiger "more intelligent" than the bear, although the bear would superficially appear to have more human-like characteristics than the tiger. S.M. Shirokogoroff, *Psychomental Complex of the Tungus* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1935), pp. 76-82.

5 On the magic effect of bear paws according to the beliefs of the Manchurian Tungus and Manchu, see Shirokogoroff, *Psychomental Complex*, p. 179. Shirokogoroff also reports that the Tungus use bear hair as medicine. The gallbladder of the bear is well-known for its "medical" value all over the boreal zone and beyond, especially in China. Ibid., p. 90.

6 The existence of a bear mythology in Palaeolithic Europe was first seriously proposed by Karl J. Narr, as also discussed by Eliade. Karl J. Narr, "Bärenzeremoniell und Schamanismus in der Älteren Steinzeit Europas," *Saeculum* 10/3 (1959), pp. 233-272; Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy,* Bollingen Series LXXVI (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), pp. 503-504. Subsequent research has questioned the archaeological and palaeontological evidence, but, basically, the proposal is sound, although it is, unfortunately, impossible to establish what the exact mythological role of the bear, as compared

the Bear Cult, the bear is elevated to the status of a supernatural being which, when treated properly, will grant success to the human community. The Bear Cult may be understood as a conceptual complex aimed at controlling the bear, and, through the bear, the resources of wild game in the boreal environment. This is congruent with the bear's status as the "Lord of the Animals," for the bear is thought to have the ability to send not only other bears, but also other species of game to the hunter.

Expressions of the Bear Cult include various kinds of taboos connected with the bear. Some of the taboos are linguistic, requiring the use of a special style or lexicon when speaking of or to a bear.[7] The underlying reason for this is that the bear is thought to understand human speech.[8] Other taboos regulate the methods of killing and skinning a bear, as well as the preparing and eating of bear meat. There are also taboos pertaining only to certain members or sections of the community, especially to women. Individual taboos concern those who have had special bear-related experiences, such as encounters or visions. The only instances when the taboos are *not* observed is when treating a "mad" bear, which without obvious reason has attacked and hurt members of the community.[9]

---

with other Pleistocene large mammals, may have been. The idea of Palaeolithic roots of the European Bear Cult is also supported by Walter (oral communication). Philippe Walter, "Le crane de l'ours – Relique, idole, masque," Lecture and handout presented at Hokkaido University / Hokkaido Minzoku Gakkai, Sapporo, on 25 September, 2001.

7 The name of the bear itself is particularly liable to undergo frequent alternations and innovations, as noted by Shirokogoroff and Vasilevich for the Ewenki. Shirokogoroff, *Psychomental Complex of*, p. 80; G.M. Vasilevich, "O kul'te medvedia u evenkov," *Religioznye predstavleniia i obriady narodov Sibiri v XIX - nachale XX veka, Sbornik Muzeia antropologii i etnografii* 27 (1971), pp. 159-160. Cf. also the summary by Hans-Joachim Paproth in *Studien über das Bärenzeremoniell. I.*, pp. 80-82. Due to the effect of the lexical taboo, most actual words for 'bear' in the languages spoken in the boreal zone are recent and etymologically transparent. However, the linguistic range of the taboos connected with the bear is often much wider and may comprise dozens or even hundreds of words and phrases, as demonstrated on the basis of Ob-Ugrian lexical and folkloric material by Marianne Sz. Bakró-Nagy in her *Die Sprache des Bärenkultes im Obugrischen, Bibliotheca Uralica* 4 (Budapest, 1979).

8 Spevakovsky reports the following taboo from the present-day Ewen reindeer herders in Northeast Siberia: "Recent wolf's or bear's footprints or their excrement might influence one's psychological condition. It is forbidden to talk about them, particularly in a negative way, since it is said that the spirits of these animals, especially the bear's, understand the human language and might take revenge, by killing domesticated reindeer" (Alexander Spevakovsky, "Rational Role of the Religious World View in the Tundra and Forest-Tundra Zones: A Case of the Even Reindeer Herders," *Proceedings of the 9th International Abashiri Symposium / Dai 9 kai Hoppou Minzoku Bunka Shimpojiumu Houkoku* (Abashiri, 1995), p. 93).

9 V.I. Cincius presents examples of the various types of taboo connected with the bear among the Neghidal. See her "Vozzreniia negidal'tsev sviazannye s okhotnich'im promyslom," *Religioznye predstavleniia i obriady narodov Sibiri v XIX - nachale XX veka, Sbornik Muzeia antropologii i etnografii* (Leningrad: Nauka, 1971), pp. 192-193. According to Cincius (Ibid., pp. 199-200) a "mad" bear, that is, one that has killed a person, is considered an evil spirit

While many of the taboos connected with the bear may be regarded as part of the general context of hunting taboos, the Bear Cult has also a more specific manifestation in the Bear Festival, during which the hunting community is gathered to celebrate the funeral of a killed bear. In the Bear Festival, the bear is placated with decorations, sacrifices, prayers, and other ritual performances. After the ceremony, its meat is consumed under the observation of strict rules. Finally, the bones of the bear are disposed of in a way anticipating its resurrection.[10] Obviously, in the Bear Festival the bear is neither a beast nor a human, but a god. It may be noted that no other beast, not even the tiger, is revered in this way in the boreal zone.[11] Moreover, in dualistic systems involving the cult of two animals, the bear is always there, while the other animal may vary from tiger to elk to whale.[12]

The most elaborate manifestation of the Bear Cult as practiced by several sedentary populations in the boreal zone, is the habit of rearing adopted bears for the specific purpose of the Bear Festival. Functioning as a kind of hostage from the world of bears, the adopted bear allows the community to hold the Bear Festival at any suitable time without the risk and labour of actual hunting.[13] While the Bear Festival itself is always a symbolic event, the ceremonial

---

and may be killed without any precautions. Even other bears may be killed at the same time. A similar tradition is reported by K.F. Karjalainen from the Ob-Ugrian Khanty of Western Siberia. See his *Jugralaisten uskonto, Suomen Suvun Uskonnot* 3 (Helsinki: Werner Söderström Oy, 1918), p. 393.

10 As Paulson notes, the practice of preserving bear bones is part of a more general ritual complex, in which animal bones are preserved in order to secure the renewal of the game resources for the species concerned. I[var] Paulson, "The Preservation of Animal Bones in the Hunting Rites of Some North-Eurasian Peoples," in V[ilmos] Diószegi, ed., *Popular Beliefs and Folklore Tradition in Siberia* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1968), pp. 451-457. Nevertheless, in the context of the Bear Festival bear bones have a significance different from the bones of other animals.

11 Naturally, the Bear Festival serves as an excuse also for many totally unrelated activities. Zolotarev notes that, apart from being a hunting ritual (and, in the case, of the Ulcha, the ritual commemoration of a dead person), the Bear Festival also functions as an opportunity for relatives to meet and enjoy food (not only bear meat) together. Alexander M. Zolotarev, "The Bear-Festival of the Olcha," *American Anthropologist* 39 (1937), p. 122.

12 On the position of the bear and other animals in the general context of animal cult in the North, see: Hitoshi Watanabe, "The Animal Cult of Northern Hunter-Gatherers: Patterns and Their Ecological Implications," in Takashi Irimoto & Takako Yamada, eds., *Circumpolar Religion and Ecology: An Anthropology of the North* (Tokyo: Tokyo University Press, 1994), pp. 47-67. A more recent general survey, though with no special focus on the bear, is: Julian Baldick, *Animal and Shaman: Ancient Religions of Central Asia* (London & New York: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 2000). The most common antipode of the bear in the boreal context is the elk (moose), but nowhere is the cult of the elk known to have reached proportions even closely reminiscent of those of the Circumpolar Bear Cult.

13 A basic description of the rearing of adoptive bears among the Hokkaido Ainu is given in John Batchelor, *The Ainu and Their Folk-Lore* (London: The Religious Tract Society, 1901), pp. 483-496; for a more recent summary, cf. Shigeki Akino, "Spirit-Sending Ceremonies," in

killing of an adoptive bear involves a double symbolism, for it allows the human community to exert a complete control of the bear and, symbolically, of the game resources of the forest. This tradition might also be viewed as a fully *institutionalized* type of Bear Cult, as opposed to the more accidental, though not necessarily less regulated, type represented by the funerals commemorating the killing of wild bears.

THE BEAR TOTEM

The complexities of the Bear Cult could hardly have reached their elaboration without supporting conceptual constructions. One such construction is concerned with the bear as an ancestor of the human race. The most famous totemistic tradition connected with the bear is the Tangun Myth of Korea (1), which refers to the founder of the so-called Ancient Joseon (Choson) state in Northern Korea:[14]

(1) The Tangun myth[15] (Korea)

> Hwanung, the son of the Sky-God Hwanin, descended from Heaven. The Bear and the Tiger came to him asking him to transform them into humans. Hwanung promised to transform them if they avoided sunlight for one hundred days. However, only the Bear could cope with this requirement, and it was transformed into a woman. She became pregnant by Hwanung and gave birth to a son, who was given the name Tangun. Tangun later became the founder of the Joseon state, a long-living ruler, a cultural hero, and the progenitor of all Koreans.

William W. Fitzhugh & Chisato O. Dubreuil, eds., *Ainu: Spirit of a Northern People* (Arctic Studies Center, National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution & University of Washington Press, 1999), pp. 248-255. Paproth extensively analyzes the tradition of "house bears" among all the groups of the Amur-Sakhalin region (*Studien über das Bärenzeremoniell,* pp. 219-330). Bear cubs have been raised also by the Ket of the Yenisei basin, as reported in E.A. Alekseenko's "The Cult of the Bear Among the Ket (Yenisei-Ostyaks)," in Vilmos Diószegi, ed., *Popular Beliefs and Folklore Tradition in Siberia* (The Hague, 1968), pp. 177-178.

14 Both Tangun (*Dan'gun*) and Ancient Joseon are fictive entities with no direct historical correlations. Nevertheless, Korean scholars traditionally treat Ancient Joseon as a historical kingdom and Tangun as its first ruler (with the mythical date 2333 BZ). As a cultural hero, Tangun is a close parallel to the Yellow Emperor (*Huangdi*) of China. The name Tangun itself is likely to preserve a trace of an early administrative title, apparently the title of the local rulers in the Korean-Manchurian border zone prior to the foundation of the historical kingdom of Goguryeo (ca. 37 BZ).

15 This version of the Tangun myth is recorded in the Korean dynastic historical work *Samguk Yusa* ("Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms"), completed by the Goryeo dynasty monk Iryeon in 1285. An English translation by Peter H. Lee is contained in Dae-seok Seo & Peter H. Lee, *Myths of Korea, Korean Studies* 4 (Seoul & Somerset: Jimoondang Publishing Company, 2000), pp. 3-4.

Contrasting the bear with the tiger, this myth conspicuously includes an etiological explanation of the bear's hibernation. Coming out of the den after the period of hibernation, the bear is transformed into a woman, who marries the Sky-God and becomes the mother of Tangun. Thus, according to this myth, the Koreans descend from a union between the Sky-God and a mother bear. While this is very probably the original version of the myth, a version with a male bear as a totemistic ancestor is also recorded from Korea. This version refers to Gim Suro (2), the ruler of the Gaya (Kaya) confederation of Southern Korea:[16]

(2) The Gim Suro myth[17] (Korea)

> Originally, the Gaya confederation was ruled by nine local chiefs. Then a chest with six eggs descended from the sky. From the eggs grew up six giant boys, who became the new rulers of Gaya. The eldest boy was Gim Suro. After consolidating his power and building a capital, Gim Suro married the Indian princess Heo Hwangok, who was sent by heavenly order to his country. The queen then dreamed of a bear and gave birth to the crown prince Godeung.

The secondary origin of the Gim Suro myth is suggested by its rather confusing structure. It remains unclear whether the male lineage of the ruling house of Gaya is to be understood as descending from a male bear, encountered by the queen in a dream, or from Gim Suro, who himself was born from an egg. Possibly, the dream of a bear is a political reference to a connection with some other entity on the Korean Peninsula, an entity which, like the mythical Ancient Joseon, derived its origin more directly from a bear.[18]

The Bear Husband

In the Tangun myth, a mother bear is transformed into a woman, who becomes the maternal ancestor of humans. In a variant of this motif, a woman marries a male bear and is herself transformed into a mother bear. In the following Sakhalin Ainu tale (3), a woman is abducted by a bear. The woman is at first reluctant to follow the bear, but later she is not willing to return to the human world:

16 In distinction from Tangun and Ancient Joseon, Gim Suro and Gaya are actual historical entities (datable to the first centuries AZ), though the details concerning their ethnic, political, and chronological framework have not survived.

17 The Gim Suro myth is also recorded in the *Samguk Yusa*. An English translation by Peter H. Lee is contained in Seo & Lee, *Myths of Korea,* pp. 18-23.

18 It may be noted that the bear totem seems to be characteristic of continental Korea only, as opposed to the southern island of Jeju, where a different tradition exists. The Jeju tradition, according to which the ancestor of the ruling house originated from a hole in the earth, seems to have Oceanic connections, entirely separate from the boreal context of the rest of Korea (oral interview with Professor Sang-Oak Lee, Seoul, May 2001).

(3) Woman marries a bear[19] (Sakhalin Ainu)

Two sisters and two brothers live together. The elder sister is the wife of the elder brother. One day, when the men are away, the elder sister meets a stranger, who drugs her with his tobacco and rapes her. Agreeing to marry him, she prepares special food and refuses to sleep with her husband. The next day, wearing her best clothes, she offers the food to the stranger in the forest, and both go away in the shape of bears. The younger brother goes chasing her. He comes to the home of the bears and is met by the father bear, who offers a compensation for what his son has done. The younger brother nevertheless wants to fight, but the woman, who has given birth to two cubs, overwhelms him with magic craft. The father bear then appears to him in a dream and promises that he will catch ten bear cubs on the way home. He will kill sixty bears every year and become a rich man. He will also find a good human wife, and his children will be successful. All of this came true.

Obviously, the union of the woman with a bear guarantees that the human hunters will continue to be successful in their activities. In exchange for her, the humans will be able to catch more bears, as well as other game. The role of the human female in the world of bears may be seen as a parallel to that of the adoptive bear in the world of humans, in that both function as links between humans and bears. However, while adoptive bears are a historically documented reality, there is no evidence of any actual cases of women being intentionally "married" to bears – though a sacrificial tradition of this kind may have existed in prehistory.

In the Udeghe version of the same tale (4), the woman is from the beginning inclined to marry a bear. She goes to live with a bear and gives birth to two cubs. Both her bear husband and she herself are "accidentally" killed by her brother, and even the cubs are ultimately killed by another hunter. When dying, the bear husband gives instructions concerning the taboos connected with the bear.[20]

(4) Elder sister marries a bear[21] (Udeghe)

A young man lives with his elder sister. Every day when he goes hunting, the sister receives a bear, who makes love with her. In the evening, the sister gives

19 The Ainu tale (original text, English translation, and commentary) was published by Piłsudski. Bronisław Piłsudski (J. Rozwadowski, ed.), *Materials for the Study of the Ainu Language and Folklore* (Cracow, 1912), pp. 116-133. Piłsudski recorded the tale in 1903 from a Sakhalin Ainu man by the name Śiáratoka, then 28 years old. A paraphrase of the same text is given in John Batchelor, *Ainu Life and Lore: Echoes of a Departing Race* (Tokyo: Kyobunkan, 1928), pp. 133-140.

20 Carl-Martin Edsman also mentions this origin of the bear taboos: "The bear allows himself to be killed by his wife's brother on the condition that his instructions on the ritual will be carefully observed in all future bear hunts" ("Bears," p. 87).

21 This Udeghe tale, recorded in the period 1964-1974, was published in I.V. Kormushin's *Udykheiskii iazyk: Materialy po etnografii, ocherk fonetiki i grammatiki, teksty i perevody, slovar'*

her brother bad meat and spares the good fat for the bear. One day, the hero hides in the vicinity and observes the bear coming. On the following day he sends his sister to fetch home meat from the taiga and receives the bear himself, wearing his sister's clothes. Although suspicious of the hero's voice, the bear enters the house, gets beaten, but escapes. When the sister arrives, she realizes what has happened and leaves the house. In the taiga the sister starts shamanizing and calling the bear, using a bear's shoulder blade as the drumstick. The bear comes and they make love. The hero follows her and notices what has happened. After some time, he meets two bear cubs, who tell him that he is their maternal uncle. The hero goes to their house and meets his sister and her bear-husband. The bear suggests that they go hunting for bear. In the process, the hero kills the bear they are chasing, but also accidentally wounds his bear-brother-in-law. At home, dying, the bear gives the following instructions: "Eat bear meat with caution! Do not give bear heart to women! Do not eat the muscles of the front feet of a bear! Do not let your sisters eat bear meat!" After this the sister also becomes a wild bear. Later, the hero, while hunting, happens to kill his bear-sister. He starts raising her cubs. In the autumn, the bear cubs want to go to hibernation. The hero makes a den for them. He tells them not to go out and leave any traces. The cubs nevertheless go out and leave traces in the snow. They are killed by another hunter. When the hero goes to see the cubs, he notes that they have been killed. In compensation, he marries the hunter's sister.

Superficially, the Ainu and Udeghe versions differ concerning the relationship of the hero with the woman who marries a bear. In the Ainu version, the woman is the wife of the hero's elder brother, and she also has a younger sister. The Udeghe version, by contrast, operates with only two persons: the hero and his elder sister. Importantly, however, the hero – the hunter – is in both cases referred to as a younger brother, while the woman is referred to as an elder sister. As a matter of fact, the roles of elder sister and wife merge, and especially in the Ainu version the relationships between the persons remain somewhat ambivalent.[22]

(original Udeghe text and Russian translation) (Moskva: Nauka, 1998), pp. 127-132. Unfortunately, Kormushin does not supply the exact date and place of recording and name of informant.

22 Both Piłsudski and Batchelor maintain that the Ainu myth refers to polyandry (or possibly group marriage), with both of the brothers being husbands of the elder woman (and possibly of her younger sister as well). Piłsudski, *Materials for the Study of the Ainu Language,* p. 129; Batchelor, *Ainu Life and Lore,* p. 133. This is, however, not completely clear from the context, for the elder brother appears to be at least the principal husband of the elder woman. It is therefore surprising that it is the younger brother who goes to chase the woman and fight the bears; the tale does not offer any explanation of this contradiction. However, it may well be a question of a secondary confusion, implying that the tale originally involved only two persons.

THE BEAR GOD

From the tales featuring a marriage between a woman and a bear it is evident that there are actually two kinds of bear. On the one hand, there are the ordinary bears, which can be hunted and killed and which form a renewable resource of the boreal environment. On the other hand, there is the Prototypical Bear, which is represented either directly by the bear husband of the human female, as in the Udeghe tale (4), or by his father, as in the Ainu tale (3). In either case, the hunter has a personal (in-law) relationship with the Prototypical Bear.

There are many indications that the Prototypical Bear has supernatural powers, which make it equal to a god. For this reason, it can die only symbolically, only to resurrect later.[23] The following Amur Ghilyak tale (5) suggests that the Prototypical Bear is, in fact, the Sky-God. In this tale, the hero's elder sister ascends to Heaven to marry the Sky-God. Although it is not expressly mentioned, both the Sky-God and the sister are bears, and both of them are ultimately killed by the hero:

(5) Elder sister marries the Sky-God[24] (Amur Ghilyak)

A boy lives with his elder sister. The sister gets ill and starts shamanizing. She tells the brother to offer ritual sticks and food to their father's stone. As this does not help, she sends the brother to ask advice from a cuckoo-shaman. Two birds on the way tell him that his sister will actually kill him and marry the Sky-God. The cuckoo catches him, and two monsters place him in an iron net and tie him to a pole. There is also a woman tied in a similar way. Servants tease him as if he was a bear, but he kills them. During the night he escapes with the help of the Iron Rat. He finds the souls of the two monsters in the

23 The conception concerning the symbolic death and resurrection of a god has parallels in many religious traditions, including Christianity. As K.F. Karjalainen notes concerning the Ob-Ugrians, the Christian tradition may, indeed, have locally influenced certain details of the Bear Cult (*Jugralaisten uskonto,* pp. 386-394 passim). On the other hand, Philippe Walter ("Le crane de l'ours") is without a doubt right in stressing the potential significance of the bear's hibernation. The reappearance of the bear in the spring may itself have been conceptualized as symbolic resurrection, giving support to the special status of the bear as the master of the renewable resources of the forest.

24 The Ghilyak tale was published by Panfilov who recorded it on the Lower Amur in 1957 from Ya.Ch. Yachk, born in 1905. V.Z. Panfilov, *Grammatika nivkhskogo iazyka* 2 (Moskva & Leningrad: Nauka, 1965), pp. 222-240 (original Ghilyak text and Russian translation). The fact that this very text was selected by Panfilov as the only sample of Amur Ghilyak folklore for his grammar probably illustrates its importance for the narrator. Interestingly, L.Ia. Shternberg, who otherwise comprehensively recorded the Ghilyak material and spiritual culture, does not mention this tale or its implications for the Ghilyak conception of the bear, although he establishes the Bear Wife motif for the Amur Tungus. See his *Giliaki, orochi, gol'dy, negidal'tsy, ainy: Stat'i i materialy* (Khabarovsk: Dal'giz, 1933), pp. 502-503.

form of eggs in a pig's belly. He takes the eggs and throws them at the monsters, killing them. He also destroys other eggs containing the souls of the servants. On the way he kills a woman, the daughter of the Pig. He sets free the woman who had been caught by the monsters. She turns out to be the Loon, the daughter of the Water God. He returns home, but his sister has disappeared. Wearing a crane skin and helped by an eagle-owl and a four-winged toad, he tries to travel to Heaven, but is prevented by a gate-keeper shaman. With the help of a good old shamaness he acquires a golden horse and finally succeeds in penetrating to Heaven in the shape of a needle hidden in the horse's ear. After killing some enemies he comes, to the house of the Sky-God and meets his own elder sister. The sister attacks him and bites him. He saves his life with a medicine given by the old shamaness. He feeds his sister and the Sky-God with each other's flesh and finally kills them. Returning home through a hole in the sky, he catches a cuckoo. She becomes a woman and he marries her.

The ursine identity of the Sky-God and his wife – the hero's elder sister – is revealed by the way they are killed. Incidentally, the hero is also temporarily kept in a cage like a bear, perhaps in order to let him, too, though only symbolically, experience the fate of an adopted bear. In subsidiary roles, the tale involves many other mythological animals with supernatural powers, including the Loon, the Pig, the Iron Rat, and the Toad. Due to the absence of comprehensive information on Ghilyak mythology, many of these figures remain obscure.

The Bear Sister

In spite of the role of the bear as a male ancestor (2), husband (3-4), and Sky-God (5), the main persons in the boreal bear myth are the younger brother, who represents the human hunter, and the elder sister, who personifies the link with the world of bears. The ambivalence between the roles of elder sister and wife is further stressed by another Udeghe tale (6), in which the elder sister *is* the wife of her younger brother. The incestuous relationship is formed on the elder sister's initiative, and without the actual understanding of the younger brother. When learning the truth, the brother kills the sister for breaking the incest taboo. In this tale, the elder sister does not explicitly become a bear, but the children born from the union of the siblings are adopted by a mother bear and grow up as bears.[25] The tale ends in an etiological explanation of a taboo connected with the bear.

---

25 The probable implication of the tale is that bears are inherently guilty of breaking a sexual taboo, for which reason the human hunter has the right to punish them by death. The incestuous relationship between the elder sister and the younger brother is just one of the many bear-related manifestations of "sexual tension," as discussed in Esther Jacobson's *The Deer Goddess of Ancient Siberia: A Study in the Ecology of Belief, Studies in the History of Religions* 55 (Leiden & New York: E.J. Brill, 1993), pp. 182-184.

(6) Children of siblings become bears*[26] *(Udeghe)

A young man lives with his elder sister. The sister sends the brother to look for a wife. However, she wants to marry him herself. When the brother has left, she makes a shortcut and waits for him in the place where he has to stay overnight. She has changed her clothes and pretends not to know him. He is puzzled, but at home his sister tells him not to be afraid of marrying her likeness. On the third time he remains living with the girl he has found, without realizing that she is actually her sister. They get a son and a daughter. When the son starts playing with an arrow, he shoots a sparrow, who tells him that his parents are siblings. Learning of this, the brother-father kills his sister-wife. He then leaves the children on a bear's track. A mother bear adopts the children, and they become bears. This is why a sister must not eat the meat of a bear killed by her brother.

Altogether, the relationship of women to bears is rather complicated, and some taboos are specifically applied to the hunter's sister. The details vary, but among most of the relevant ethnic groups women are not allowed to eat bear meat, or they are allowed to eat only certain parts of the bear; in particular, women are not supposed to eat the fore parts of the bear. Also, women are not allowed to sit on a bear skin, and they do not have full access to all the events of the Bear Festival. It goes without saying that women are barred from hunting bears.[27] On the other hand, women can handle and prepare bear meat, and, as a curious detail, they can take care of adopted bears and even breast-feed them when they are small cubs,[28] suggesting a situation very similar to the folkloric material.

26 This Udeghe tale was published by Nikolaeva who recorded it in the period 1989-1997 from Nadezhda P. Kukchenko. Irina Nikolaeva, *A Grammar of Udihe* (Proefschrift, Universiteit Leiden, 1999), pp. 514-519 (original Udeghe version, grammatical analysis, and English translation). Kormushin has published an almost identical version (*Udykheiskii iazyk*, pp. 164-170). In the latter version, however, the final part of the tale has been reshaped as follows: the children are raised not by a bear but by an elk; they remain humans; when they grow up they meet their father, who is wandering in the taiga without eating; he asks the children to make a fire and warm him; when the children do this, his back turns spotted and he is transformed into a musk-deer. Obviously, all these changes are secondary influences from other myths and fables. The replacement of the bear by the elk suggests that the mythological context of the tale had been forgotten.

27 The special restrictions applied to women with regard to bears are discussed by Shirokogoroff (*Psychomental Complex*, p. 80 and the footnote on the same page). Shirokogoroff argues that the Tungus generally do not allow women to eat bear meat, but among the Birarchen women can eat the posterior part of the bear. Even men should not eat the muscles of the front feet of the bear. The Udeghe taboo preventing the hunter's sister from eating bear meat is confirmed by Kormushin (*Udykheiskii iazyk*, p. 31). Several even more specific taboos specific to various groups of the Ewenki are mentioned by Vasilevich ("O kul'te medvedia u evenkov," pp. 158, 163).

28 An occasion of several Hokkaido Ainu women breast-feeding a bear cub was witnessed and recorded by Batchelor (*The Ainu and Their Folk-Lore*, p. 484); for a related discussion, see Paproth, *Studien über das Bärenzeremoniell*, pp. 322-324.

The Bear Shaman

An important aspect of the tales representing the hero's elder sister as a bear is that she is often described as being also a shaman. Thus, in the Udeghe tale (4) the sister calls the Prototypical Bear by shamanizing, using, moreover, an ordinary bear's shoulder blade as the drumstick.[29] In the Ghilyak tale (5) the sister starts shamanizing after becoming ill (or while pretending to be ill). There is also a wicked cuckoo shaman in the tale, who is in the sister's service, while the hero ultimately gets help from an unidentified good old shamaness.

The theme of a shamanizing elder sister is repeated in a Western Ewenki tale (7), in which again no explicit mention is made of a bear. It is, nevertheless, clear that the elder sister is a bear, since her brother chases her when she is still small. Later, she devours their parents and threatens her brother, who finally succeeds in killing her with the help of his wife:

(7) Why the Ewenki have slant eyes[30] (Western Ewenki)

A boy lives with his parents and elder sister. When they are still children and go to the forest, the boy chases his sister and pretends to kill her. Their mother discloses to the girl that she is, indeed, destined to be killed by her brother. However, the brother leaves his home and goes to live in a far-away region, where he marries a rich and wise girl. In spite of their good life, he cannot resist his longing for his parents and sister, and decides to visit his old home. Reaching the tent of his parents, he notices that his sister has turned into an evil shaman. She has killed and devoured their parents, and although she prepares her brother a seemingly friendly welcome, he is afraid of becoming the next victim. During the night, when his sister is sleeping, he smears her eyes with fish glue and escapes. Upon waking, the sister cannot open her eyes, but after considerable rubbing she nevertheless manages to produce a narrow slit in both eyes. Having regained her eyesight, she begins to chase her brother, but is finally killed through the cunning of her sister-in-law. After this event, various natural calamities, including storms, floods, and torrents, started to occur on earth. This is also the reason why the Tungus [Ewenki] are slant-eyed.

29 According to Vasilevich ("O kul'te medvedia u evenkov," p. 165), it was common among the Ewenki all over Siberia to use the (apparently right front) paw of a bear as a divining instrument. If there was a shaman in the neighbourhood, the paw could also be given to him/her to be made into drumstick.

30 The Ewenki tale was originally written down (in Russian) from the Western Ewenki of the Stony Tunguska region by I.M. Suslov in 1926, as published in Karl H. Menges, *Materialien zum Schamanismus der Ewenki-Tungusen an der mittleren und unteren Tunguska. Gesammelt und aufgezeichnet von I.M. Susłov. Studies in Oriental Religions* 8 (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1983), pp. 89-92 (German translation). An English translation and a preliminary discussion of the tale was presented by the present author. Juha Janhunen, "New Material on Tungus Shamanism [Review of Menges 1983]," *Finnisch-Ugrische Forschungen* 46 (1984), p. 183.

The etiological end of this tale appears very late, as is clear from its basic incongruence with the preceding narrative. The explanation of the "slant eyes" of the Ewenki appears particularly anachronistic in the Siberian context and might suggest that the tale had been reinterpreted after the first contacts with the Russians (after the late 16th century).[31] Although originally belonging to a shamanistic context, the tale had obviously lost its meaning to the narrator.[32] Even so, it preserves the basic elements of the boreal bear myth, in which a hero (younger brother) is opposed to a bear shaman (elder sister).

The "slant eyes" of the elder sister in the Ewenki tale are, however, also a hidden reference to the bear. The same motif – gluing the eyes – appears in a Nanai fable (8), in which the bear appears with its universal enemy, the fox:

(8) Why the bear has small eyes*[33] *(Nanai)

The fox has cheated the bear, and the bear wants to kill the fox. The bear catches the fox, as the latter is making glue. The fox tells the bear that smearing the eyes with glue improves eyesight. The bear asks the fox to have its own eyes smeared too. Having smeared the bear's eyes, the fox tells the bear to sleep. Upon waking, the bear cannot open its eyes. However, after intensive rubbing it is able to see again, but its eyes remain small and bleary. This is the reason why the bear has small eyes. The bear continues to chase the fox, but is ultimately killed by the latter.

It should be noted that the bear in the fable version of the tale is not specifically a female, nor a shaman. Most probably, this fable arose simply as an etiological explanation of the seemingly "small" eyes of the bear. A natural context for the tale was offered by the Bear vs. Fox genre. However, because of its connection with the bear, the fable was later, probably not accidentally, incorporated into the bear myth, as exemplified by the Ewenki tale.

---

31 The intended implication is that the cut of the eyes of the (Mongoloid) Ewenki differs from that of the (Europoid) Russians. The attribution of the Ewenki eyes to the heritage of the elder sister is, however, illogical in the general context of the tale, since it is the younger brother (the positive hero) who is supposed to represent the Ewenki.

32 As reported by Menges (*Materialien zum Schamanismus*, p. 84), the informant was a man called Luchetkan, 55 years old at the time of the recording. Although not a shaman himself, he descended from a lineage of five generations of shamans. Most probably, he had learnt the tale as part of the shamanistic folklore of his direct ancestors. The tale may, of course, have been distorted already before his generation.

33 The Nanai fable (Nanai version only) appears to have been first published in the Cyrillic Nanai school primer by N.A. Lipskaya-Val'rond. See her *Bongo bitkhe, Dopushchen Nauchno-Metodicheskim Sovetom Dal'krayono (dlia gol'dskikh shkol 1-i stupeni, likpunktov i samoobrazovaniia)* (Buri Khotono [Khabarovsk]: Izdanie Dal'krayono, 1928), p. 101. This version probably derives from the Nanai living immediately north of the Amur-Sungari confluence. An almost identical Bikin Nanai version has been published in L.I. Sem, *Ocherki dialektov nanaiskogo iazyka: Bikinskii (ussuriiskii) dialekt* (Leningrad: Nauka, 1976), p. 117. See also the English translation and preliminary discussion by the present author: Janhunen, "New Material on Tungus Shamanism," pp. 183-184.

The Bear Myth

On the basis of the presented folkloric material (1-8), the elements of the boreal bear myth may be summarized as follows: The bear is the Lord of the Animals and a male deity, who has the power of regulating the resources of the forest. In order to secure his share of the resources, the human hunter has to establish a relationship with the bear. Since the hunter is typically a man, the relationship is established through his elder sister, who marries the bear and is transformed into a bear herself. In order to approach the bear, the sister has to assume the role of shaman.

In light of the bear myth, a killed mother bear is actually the hunter's sister, while a killed male bear is his brother-in-law (or father-in-law).[34] In other words, killing a bear amounts to homicide, while eating bear meat equals symbolic cannibalism, which means that both actions are permitted only under the observation of strict rules. Since the bear has a closer relationship with the hunter's sister than with the hunter himself, the sister has to follow stricter taboos than other women, and all women have to follow stricter taboos than men. Bear cubs are actually human children, who have to be nursed until they have grown up.

It goes without saying that the different elements of the bear myth do not necessarily represent a single chronological layer. The most fundamental element of the myth is the conception of the bear as an animal worthy of special reverence. This element may well date back to the Palaeolithic, making it impossible to locate its origins with any exactitude. The tradition concerning the marriage of a woman with a bear, and the birth of bear cubs from this union, is also surprisingly widespread in the boreal zone, extending from Western and Northern Europe to Sakhalin and Hokkaido, and further to North America.[35] Even relatively minor details, such as the taboo forbidding women to eat the

---

34 The basic male identity of the bear is revealed by such well-known Tungusic appellations of the bear as *ama* 'father' and *mapa* (*mafa*) 'grandfather' (more rarely used also of the tiger), cf. Shirokogoroff, *Psychomental Complex*, pp. 80-81. The fact that these appellations can also be applied to female bears (and tigers) does not interfere with the Bear Myth, which operates at another level of abstraction.

35 The areal and chronological dimensions of the "Bear Wife" motif (better termed the *Bear Husband* motif) are discussed by Edsman, who quotes examples from Germanic and Sami mythology and folklore, as well as from the Indians of the Pacific Coast of North America. Carl-Martin Edsman, "The Story of the Bear Wife in Nordic Tradition," *Ethnos* 21 (1956), pp. 36-56. Edsman also mentions a related tradition, perhaps of a more restricted European origin, according to which the bear, during its hibernation, is guarded by a female spirit (Forest Maiden). A more recent treatment of the Bear Cult among the North American Indians is Mareile Kohn's *Das Bärenzeremoniell in Nordamerika: Der Bär im Jagritual und in der Vorstellungswelt der Montagnais-Naskapi-East Cree und der Chippewa-Ojibwa* (Hohenschäftlarn: Klaus Renner Verlag, 1986).

fore parts of a bear, are attested in an identical form in regions as distant as Lapland and the Amur basin.[36]

The Bear Festival is a more clearly localizable phenomenon. Although the ritual killing and eating of the bear is common throughout the Eurasian boreal zone, the Bear Festival seems to be attested as a major ritual in only three relatively restricted regions: among the Finns and Sami of Fennoscandia (Finland and Lapland), among the Ob-Ugrians, Selkup, and Ket of Western Siberia (the Ob-Yenisei region), and among the Amur Tungus, Ghilyak, and Ainu of Eastern Manchuria and Northern Japan (the Amur basin, Sakhalin, and Hokkaido).[37] Moreover, the elaborateness of the ritual increases towards the east, reaching its height among the Ghilyak and Ainu of Sakhalin and Hokkaido. The Bear Cult of the Ghilyak and Ainu is clearly institutionalized, involving the rearing of adoptive bears.

While the Bear Festival may still be regarded as a general Circumpolar tradition with no easily detectable place or time of origin, the identification of the hunter's elder sister as a shaman has a considerably more specific distribution. This motif is well attested in the folklore of the Tungusic peoples as well as the Ghilyak, but it seems to be alien to both the Fennoscandian and the Western Siberian Bear Cult complex. Since both the Tungusic peoples and the Ghilyak have their linguistic origins in Central and Southern Manchuria,[38] it appears possible that the motif of the elder-sister-turned-bear-shaman was once restricted to this very region, from where the linguistic expansion of the North-

---

36 This taboo was explained by Per Fjällström (1755), as quoted by Edsman, as being due to the woman's physical contact with her bear husband: "women must not eat the front part [of the bear], or any parts which the woman can reach when embracing the bear" (Edsman, "The Story of the Bear Wife").

37 On the Bear Cult and Bear Festival of the Siberian peoples, see, in particular, Karjalainen and Kannisto for the Ob-Ugrians, Paproth and Alekseenko for the Ket, Zolotarev for the Amur Tungus (Ulcha), and Slawik for the Ghilyak and Ainu. Karjalainen, *Jugralaisten uskonto*, pp. 512-539; Artturi Kannisto, *Materialien zur Mythologie der Wogulen, Bearbeitet und herausgegeben von E.A. Virtanen & Matti Liimola. Mémoires de la Société Finno-Ougrienne* 113 (Helsinki, 1958), pp. 333-383; Hans-Joachim Paproth, "Das Bärenfest der Keto in Nordsibirien in Zusammenhang gebracht mit den Bärenzeremonien und Bärenfesten anderer Völker der nördlichen Hemisphäre," *Anthropos* 57 (1962), pp. 55-88; Alekseenko, "The Cult of the Bear," pp. 175-191; Zolotarev, "The Bear-Festival of the Olcha," pp. 113-130; Alexander Slawik, "Zum Problem des Bärenfestes bei den Ainu und Giljaken," *Wiener Beiträge zur Kulturgeschichte und Linguistik* 9 (1952), pp. 189-203.

38 The Tungusic homeland has been an issue of some controversy in the past, but an overall analysis of the ethnohistorical situation in the Manchurian region leaves no alternative but that the Tungusic languages derive ultimately from Southern Manchuria and/or Northern Korea. Juha Janhunen, *Manchuria: An Ethnic History, Mémoires de la Société Finno-Ougrienne* 222 (Helsinki, 1996), pp. 153-158, 167-172, 229-233. The linguistic ancestors of the Northern Tungus (Ewenki-Ewen) seem to have been concentrated in the Middle Amur basin until they expanded to the north, ultimately taking their language as far northwest as the Lower Yenisei (Western Ewenki) and as far northeast as the Anadyr and Central Kamchatka (Ewen).

ern Tungus took it ultimately further north and west to various parts of Siberia. This conclusion seems to have relevance to the question of the origin of female shamanism.

The Female Shaman

It is well known that in the classic complex of Siberian shamanism, shamans can be both men and women. Among most of the relevant ethnic groups, there seems to be no significant functional difference between male and female shamans, and the ratio of the sexes among professional shamans is roughly one to one. This is the case among, for instance, the Northern Tungusic Ewenki.[39] It is true, there are factors, like the patriarchal organization of clans, which may inherently favour male shamans, while there also factors, like the interference of pregnancy and menstruation, which may make it more difficult for female shamans to pursue their careers.[40] Perhaps exactly for these reasons, the so-called "white" shamans, among the groups that have them, seem to be always men.[41]

However this may be, the general conclusion is that the common roles of the shaman as a teacher, healer, clairvoyant, psychopomp, and performing artist, are accessible to both males and females.[42] The Northeast Asian variant of the bear myth now defines one more role which, interestingly, is accessible *only* to women. This is the role of the *bear medium*, whose task it is to approach the

39 The Ewenki shamans may be regarded as historically prototypical, since they are the source of the international name for the concept of *shaman*. Shirokogoroff registered a total of 10 male and 10 female shamans among the Ewenki (Orochen) groups of Central and Northern Manchuria (*Psychomental Complex*, p. 386). The ratio varied from group to group, with, for instance, the Kumarchen having no female shamans against three male shamans, while the Birarchen had two male shamans against four female shamans. In view of the small general number of the individuals counted, such variations are apparently statistically irrelevant, and the conclusion may be drawn that there was no gender-related bias in the choice of the shamanic profession.

40 As Shirokogoroff (Ibid., pp. 349-350) notes, male shamans have the advantage of being always able to stay with their clans, while female shamans, when married, must leave their original clan environment and enter the clan environment of their husbands, though still keeping the spirits of their own paternal clan. Also, female shamans are not allowed to perform during pregnancy or menstruation, which makes them less automatically accessible to the clients.

41 With reference to the materials of A.V. Anoxin on the "white" shamanism of the Altai Turks, Eliade notes that female shamans are not allowed to undertake the celestial journey required of "white" shamans (*Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, p. 189). Therefore, all female shamans are "black," a category that, however, also includes males. On the other hand, it is the "black" shamans who are more powerful, more dangerous, and more original in the historical context.

42 For a general discussion of the various roles of a shaman, see, e.g. Eliade, Ibid., pp. 181-184; Mihály Hoppál, *Shaman: Traditions and Transition* (Budapest: International Society for Shamanistic Research, 2000), pp. 10-15.

Bear God in order to make bear hunting possible. The bear myth clearly provides a context which favours the occurrence of female shamans. Moreover, it would be logical to assume that the stronger the impact of the bear myth is on the religious conceptions of a population, the more female shamans will be required.

It is therefore perhaps not a coincidence that female shamans are, indeed, conspicuously common in the Manchurian region, broadly defined, the very same region where the bear myth is also particularly prominent. Most importantly, female shamans predominate in both Korean and Japanese shamanism. The Korean female shaman (*mudang*) does have a male counterpart (*baksu*), but the spheres of the two tend to differ and the vast majority of all Korean shamans are females.[43] In Japan, all shamans (*itako*) are females.[44] The same seems to be true of the Hokkaido Ainu shamans (*tusukur*), while among the Sakhalin Ainu and Ghilyak, as well as among all the other Manchurian and Siberian populations, there are also male shamans.[45] Even so, some particularly famous shamanic figures, such as the Nishan Shaman of the Manchu, are specifically women.[46]

---

43 For recent work on Korean shamanism, see, for instance, Tae-kon Kim, *Korean Shamanism: Muism. Korean Studies Series* 9 (Seoul: Jimoongdang Publishing Company, 1998); Huyn-key Kim Hogart, *Korean Shamanism and Cultural Nationalism, Korean Studies Series* 14 (Seoul: Jimoongdang Publishing Company, 1999). On the roles of women in Korean shamanism, see Laurel Kendall, "Korean Shamanism: Women's Rites and a Chinese Comparison," George A. de Vos & Takao Sofue, eds., *Religion and Family in East Asia, Senri Ethnological Studies* 11 (Osaka: National Museum of Ethnology, 1984); Laurel Kendall, *Shamans, Housewives, and Other Restless Spirits: Women in Korean Ritual Life* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1985).

44 The practicing shamans in Japan today, as discussed by, for instance, Sasamori, are confined to the northeastern part of the Island of Honshu (the Tohoku region), to where they were pushed by the anti-shamanist laws of the early Meiji period. Takefusa Sasamori, "Healing Arts of the Itako," in Takako Yamada & Takashi Irimoto, eds., *Circumpolar Animism and Shamanism* (Sapporo: Hokkaido University Press. 1997), pp. 47-54.

45 There is information that the majority of the Sakhalin Ainu shamans were males, although almost all Hokkaido Ainu shamans were females. This may be due to a secondary Siberian impact on the Sakhalin Ainu culture, as suggested in Takeshi Irimoto "Ainu Shamanism: Oral Tradition, Healing, and Dramas," *Circumpolar Animism and Shamanism*, pp. 30-33. It is more difficult to establish to what degree the female shamanism of the Hokkaido Ainu is an actual remnant of the "original" Ainu culture, for it might also reflect the secondary influence of Japanese (Tohoku) shamanism. As Irimoto notes, however, the general congruence of Ainu shamanism with other aspects of the Ainu culture suggests that Japanese influence has not been decisive.

46 On the Nishan Shaman, see Giovanni Stary, "A New Altaic Science: Nishanology," in Bernt Brendemoen, ed., *Altaic Osloensia: Proceedings from the 32nd Meeting of the PIAC* (Oslo, 1990), pp. 317-323. Shirokogoroff establishes two categories of shaman among the Manchu (*amba saman* 'great shaman' and *pyogun saman* 'clan shaman'), both of which were open to both men and women (*Psychomental Complex*, pp. 345-346). He also mentions that female shamans are more common among the New Manchu (*Ice Manju*) than among the Old Manchu (*Fe Manju*).

The geographical differences in the occurrence of female shamans suggest that there are two major types of North Asian shamanism. The two types may be identified as Siberian and Manchurian, respectively. In the Siberian type, which covers most of North Asia, but extends also to Central Asia, there is no functional differentiation between male and female shamans. In the Manchurian type, which is today centered on Korea and Japan, but which also extends to Sakhalin and Continental Manchuria, there is a clear predominance of female shamans. Although the reasons behind female shamanism may be multiple,[47] it is reasonable to assume, as a working hypothesis, that at least one of the reasons is the original role of the female shaman as the special medium required by the Bear Cult.

Incidentally, the existence of the two regions of shamanism in North Asia is also confirmed by the shamanistic terminologies of the North Asian languages. In the languages of the classic type of Siberian shamanism, the shaman is typically referred to by a single sex-indifferent name.[48] In the languages of the Manchurian type of shamanism, such as Manchu (*saman*) and Ghilyak (*chamng*), there is normally also only one term for the shaman, which may well originally have referred to female shamans.[49] However, in the border zone between the two regions, which largely corresponds to the Mongolic language area, there is

---

47 It is, for instance, well known that apparently all the present-day shamans in Japan are blind. This does not, however, mean that blindness is a primary precondition of female shamanism. Rather, since the shamanic profession in Japan was open only to women, it simply tended to attract blind women, who had few other opportunities in life. Of course, physical blindness may also have been understood as an asset facilitating "inner seeing." It may be noted that the Korean female shamans, whom the Japanese shamans functionally resemble, are generally not blind.

48 It is a different matter that in most languages of North Asia there are separate terms for two or more categories of shaman. These categories, which basically reflect various types of specialization and levels of professional knowledge, are not connected with the sex of the person. Some of the categories should probably not be regarded as shamans, at all, in the strict sense of the term. As discussed by the present author, the shamanistic terminologies of the Siberian languages are largely language-family-specific, involving only a few borrowings from one group of languages into another. Juha Janhunen, "Siberian Shamanistic Terminology," in *Traces of the Central Asian Culture in the North*, *Mémoires de la Société Finno-Ougrienne* 194 (Helsinki, 1986), pp. 97-117; Idem, "The Eurasian Shaman: Linguistic Perspectives," Paper Read at the Workshop on *Shamanhood: The Endangered Language of Ritual* (Oslo: Centre for Advanced Studies, forthcoming). This suggests that the basic structures and concepts of shamanism are not the result of a single recent cultural innovation. Rather, shamanism must have a considerable age, which dates beyond the ages of the reconstructable protolanguages.

49 There are, of course, many open questions concerning the history of the shamanistic terminology in the languages of Manchuria. One important detail is connected with the etymological identity of Manchu *saman* and Ghilyak *chamng* (< **saman*) and their possible connection with the homonymous Ghilyak word *chamng* 'eagle,' cf. Janhunen, "Siberian Shamanistic Terminology," pp. 101-103; Idem, "The Eurasian Shaman: Linguistic Perspectives."

a special term for 'female shaman' (*idugan*),[50] which should probably be understood as a marked expression against the generic term for 'shaman' (*büxe*).[51]

THE CHINESE CONNECTION

The above assertions obviously require some kind of substantiation, which would prove that women, shamans, and bears have actually occurred in a single context outside of the folkloric traditions. The female shamanism of Korea and Japan exists today separately from the Bear Cult, while the Bear Cult of Manchuria and Siberia has hardly any transparent connection with female shamanism. It is true that the bear is reported to occur as one of the animal spirits, or protecting animals, of the Manchurian shaman, and shamans are also occasionally known to have taken the shape of a bear.[52] A bearskin coat is known to have been a standard accessory of Ewenki shamans during their journey to the Underworld.[53] However, these examples do not seem to be specifically connected with female shamans.

There is, indeed, a conceptual difference between the regular animal-shaped helping spirits or vehicles of a shaman, who are present during shamanic séances,

---

50 There is a considerable literature on the origin of the term *idugan*, as most recently reviewed in: Roy Andrew Miller & Nelly Naumann, *Altaische schamanistische Termini im Japanischen* (Hamburg: Gesellschaft für Natur- und Völkerkunde Ostasiens. Hamburg, 1994), pp. 25-63. In spite of opposite opinions (including that of Miller), there is no question that the Mongolic term is of a Turkic origin, deriving from a word (**iduka*), which is historically documented in Turkic in the meaning 'sacred.' In its secondary reference to female shamans, the term is attested all over Northern Mongolic (Mongol proper, Buryat, Dagur), as well as (as a Mongolic loanword) in Yakut. The Japanese term *itako* 'female shaman' has also been mentioned in this context (Janhunen, "Siberian Shamanistic Terminology," p. 102; Miller & Naumann, *Altaische schamanistische Termini im Japanischen*, pp. 14-19, 53-63), but it is more properly explained as a separate formation, based on Japanese *ita* 'divining board' (with +*ko* 'female'). Other etymologies, as listed by Sasamori ("Healing Arts of the Itako," p. 47), are linguistically and historically hardly tenable.

51 No functional difference is reported to exist between the Mongol male and female shamans. It remains somewhat unclear to what extent the generic term (modern Mongol *böö*) may have become specialized in the meaning of 'male shaman.'

52 According to Shirokogoroff (*Psychomental Complex*, pp. 174, 304-305) all shamans have bear and tiger spirits, and stylized depictions of bears can be used as accessories during a shamanistic séance. Shirokogoroff (Ibid., pp. 371-372) also mentions two examples of male shamans appearing in the role of bear. On one occasion, a shaman prevented the killing of a bear, claiming "his soul was inside the bear." On another occasion, two shamans had a fight while taking on the shapes of a bear and a tiger.

53 According to Vasilevich ("O kul'te medvedia u evenkov," p. 165) a beginning Ewenki shaman always made first a bear paw drumstick and then a bearskin coat. Shamanizing in a bearskin coat was invariably accompanied by the sacrificial killing of an animal. In some regions, shamans also had another coat, made of a deerskin, which was used during shamanic rituals not directed to the Underworld.

and whose depictions are worn on the shaman's dress or other accessories, and the bear whose shape the female shaman takes in order to approach the Prototypical Bear. In the latter case, the Bear Myth may be seen as a pre-existent script for a ritual drama, which is staged in the shamanic séance with the female shaman as the main actor. The role of the female shaman is to search for the help of the Celestial Ruler, who, although conceptualized as the Prototypical Bear, is much more powerful than the specialized helping spirits represented by other animals.

A possible substantiation of these considerations comes from Shang and early Zhou China (ca. 1200-700 BZ). Chinese shamans (*wu*) seem to have been originally women, whose main role was to function as oracles. There is also both textual and epigraphical information suggesting that the female shamans of Ancient China performed in bearskins.[54] The fact that the bear had an important role in the mythology of the Ancient Chinese is confirmed by its frequent occurrence in Chinese art and material culture. Still in Han times (ca. 200 BZ - 200 AZ), it was common to depict the bear in small bronze statuettes, the meaning of which remains obscure, but which must have had a mythological connection. Obviously, Ancient China was characterized by a highly developed and institutionalized Bear Cult.

It may be presumed that the female shamanism of Ancient China was already distanced from the simple context of hunting rites. The Chinese Bear Cult, with the female shaman as the main medium, must have involved an elaborate ritual drama in which it was no longer the primitive hunter, but the earthly ruler – king or prince – who sought a contact with the Sky-God, who may or may not have been conceptualized as the Prototypical Bear. Through the female shaman, clad as a bear, the ruler was able to get the help of celestial powers. Unfortunately, in the absence of preserved documentation, the exact structure of this drama and its position in the Ancient Chinese society remain unknown.[55] To a considerable extent, the Chinese shamanistic traditions were distorted by the framework of Taoism.[56]

---

54 Eliade discusses the bear-shaped female shamans of Ancient China (*Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy,* p. 452, note 97). It is true that the interpretations by Hopkins concerning the origin of several Chinese characters connected with bearskin-clad figures and shamanism, including the character for '[female] shaman,' remain very hypothetical. See L.C. Hopkins, "The Bearskin, Another Pictographic Reconnaissance from Primitive Prophylactic to Present-day Panache: A Chinese Epigraphic Puzzle," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1943), pp. 110-117; Idem, "The Shaman or Chinese Wu: His inspired Dancing and Versatile Character," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1945), pp. 3-16. Mair has presented another equally uncertain etymology for the Chinese word for 'shaman' (*wu*): Victor H. Mair, "Old Sinitic *Myag, Old Persian Magur, and English 'Magician'," *Early China* 15 (1990), pp. 27-47. A more promising identification is based on the well-known homonymy of the words for 'shaman' and 'to dance,' though the origin of the graphic shape of the character for 'shaman' remains obscure.

55 The possibility that Ancient China was a society in which shamanism functioned as an elaborate structure reminiscent of a "high religion" has often been suggested. For instance,

CONCLUDING REMARKS

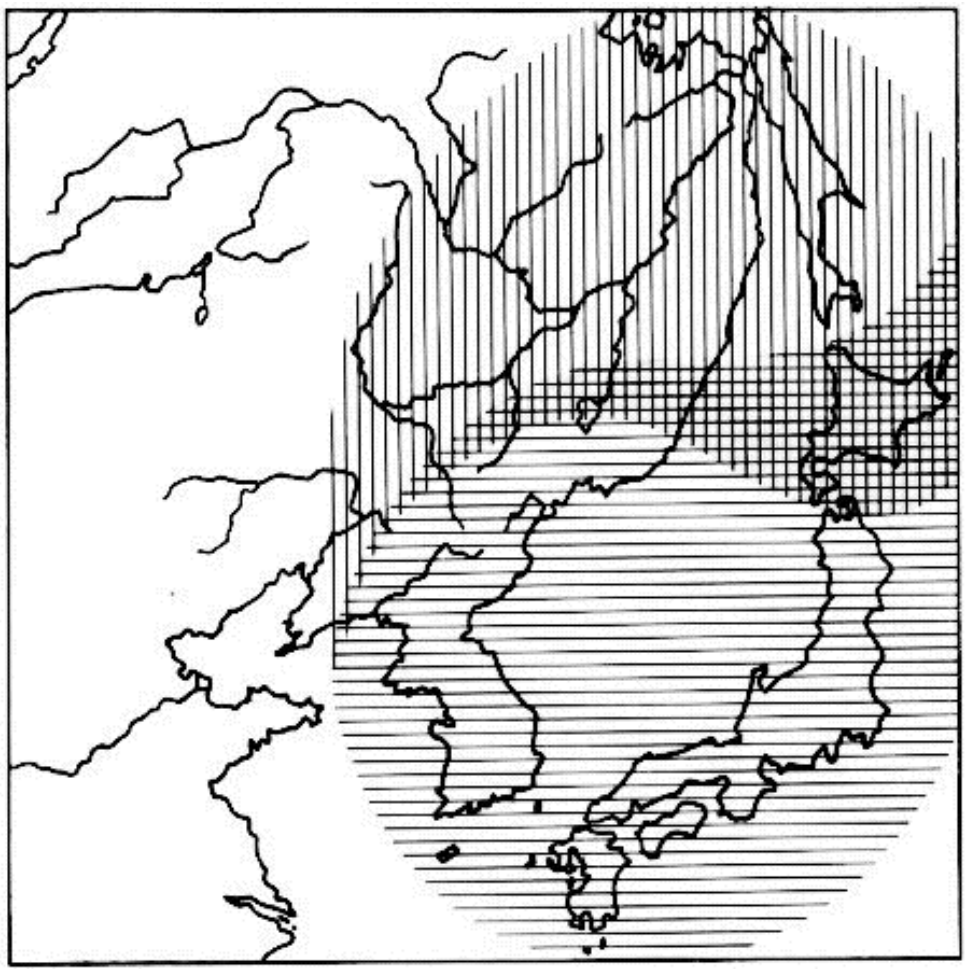
While both shamanism and the Bear Cult are widespread and diffuse phenomena, the material presented above suggests that they together may have formed the source of a very specific tradition of Manchurian female shamanism. This type of female shamanism may be seen as deriving from the specific need of having a bear-shaped female medium to approach the Bear God, or the Prototypical Bear. Although the link between the female shaman and the bear has been obscured in all known modern forms of Manchurian female shamanism, the original connection is suggested by historical information, as well as by the independently documented institutionalized type of Bear Cult in the Manchurian sphere.

Geographically, the phenomenon of Manchurian female shamanism extends as a belt along the southern margin of the Sea of Japan from Continental Manchuria to Korea to Japan to Hokkaido. Similarly, the phenomenon of institutionalized Bear Cult extends along the northern margin of the Sea of Japan from Continental Manchuria to Sakhalin to Hokkaido (see the Map). The two phenomena meet today in the culture of the Hokkaido Ainu, which is characterized by both female shamanism (close in type to the Japanese female shamanism) and institutionalized Bear Cult (close in type to the Bear Cult of the Amur-Sakhalin peoples). This distribution suggests that the two phenomena derive ultimately from a single innovation center, which may well have been located in Ancient China or Southern Manchuria.[57]

Jacobson mentions this (*The Deer Goddess of Ancient Siberia*, pp. 205-206); however, she does not elaborate on the issues of female shamanism and the Bear Cult in this context.

56 The historical background of Chinese shamanism, including its connection with Taoism, is summarized by Eliade, whose main source is Jan J.M. de Groot. Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy,* pp. 447-461; Jan J.M. de Groot, *The Religious System of China* 1-6 (Leiden, 1892-1910). It goes without saying that the bear depictions and other manifestations of the Bear Cult in Ancient China deserve to be studied in detail. It is at present still impossible to specify, for instance, whether the Bear Cult was originally characteristic of only a certain part (a certain political state or cultural sphere) of China. Considering its obvious cultural and political importance, the Bear Cult of Ancient China remains a major challenge for multidisciplinary research. The same is true of Chinese shamanism, in general. Too often today, the study of "Chinese shamanism" is only concerned with the shamanism of the "minority peoples," while the historically more crucial phenomenon of Han Chinese shamanism remains little investigated.

57 It is difficult to distinguish between the cultural influences that may have come from China proper, and those that came from Southern Manchuria. The fact is that Southern Manchuria, with the well-established Neolithic culture of Hongshan, is one of the source regions of the historically documented Chinese civilization. It is entirely possible, but for the time being hypothetical, that the Northeast Asian Bear Myth originated in this very context, from where it would have naturally spread both southwards to China (proper) and northwards to the Amur basin.



Map. *Institutionalized Bear Cult (vertical lining) and female shamanism (horizontal lining) in the Greater Manchurian region. Both phenomena may have originally involved cultural innovations expanding from Ancient China, but their expansions followed two different routes along the margins of the Sea of Japan, ultimately meeting in the culture of the Hokkaido Ainu.*

The modern female shamanism of Korea and Japan and the institutionalized Bear Cult of the Amur-Sakhalin region should therefore be seen as divergent developments of a single religious complex. Although Korea, in particular, has a well-documented tradition of bear mythology, the female shamanism of Korea and Japan survives today only in a "refined" form, with no overt connection to the Bear Cult. This may well be due to secondary disturbing cultural influences. In Korea, for instance, the popularity of female shamanism seems to have been promoted by a need to create a counterbalance to the other, basically male-dominated, religious and philosophical constructions, most importantly Confucianism.[58] It is also possible that the settled agrarian social organization in both Korea and Japan favoured female shamanism.[59]

58 This claim is made by Vitebsky, though it involves a certain contradiction, in that it remains unclear why the dominance of other religions would have promoted shamanism as a counter-

Similarly, the institutionalized Bear Cult of the Amur-Sakhalin region, though supported by a rich folkloric tradition of bears and females, is no longer specifically connected with the institution of female shamanism. However, it is important to note that the institutionalized Bear Cult in this region, like its counterpart in Ancient China, is also rather distant from the rituals of the boreal hunters. The economy of the ethnic groups today embraced by the institutionalized Bear Cult is by no means dominated by hunting. Rather, it involves a complicated combination of hunting, fishing, gathering, and small-scale agriculture, including the rearing of domestic animals. The elaborate Bear Festival documented from the region should therefore also be seen as a "refined" form of a spiritual tradition that has lost its original concrete connection with the boreal subsistence economy.

There are indications that both the female shamanism of Korea and Japan and the Bear Cult of peripheral Manchuria are intimately connected with the worship of the Sky. A Celestial Cult is well-documented for both Ancient China and Korea,[60] and the Sky-God is either mentioned or implied in several variants of the Bear Myth in Northeast Asia. It is still impossible to specify how, why, and where, the Celestial Ruler came to be associated with the Prototypical Bear, but this connection seems to be the main factor underlying the institutionalized Bear Cult of the modern peoples of the Amur, Sakhalin, and Hokkaido. It may be assumed that many of the details of the elaborate Bear Festival in this region are relatively recent,[61] and geographically transmitted from Continental Manchuria or China.

---

culture in Korea, when in China other religions seem to have been exactly the factor that led to the disappearance of female shamanism as a living tradition. Piers Vitebsky, *Shamanism* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995 [2001]), pp. 118-119.

59 This conclusion is basically in line with the conception of Vitebsky, who recognizes the areal unity of the female shamanism in China, Korea, and Japan, claiming also that female shamans, in general, are a feature of agrarian societies (*Shamanism*, pp. 32-33, 45). It is, however, questionable whether Vitebsky is right when he maintains that "the classic Siberian idea of the shaman as master of spirits is very much an image of the male hunter or warrior." If, after all, the role of bear, as provided by the Bear Myth, is one of the sources of female shamanism, then this role would also, and particularly strongly so, be required by a hunting society.

60 On the role of the Celestial Cult in Ancient Korea and elsewhere in East Asia, see, e.g. R.Sh. Dzharylgasinova, *Etnogenez i etnicheskaia istoriia koreitsev po dannym epigrafiki (stela Kvangetkho-vana)* (Moskva: Nauka, 1979), pp. 97-108.

61 This seems also to be the position taken by Paproth, who assumes that the Bear Cult of the Amur-Sakhalin-Hokkaido belt, though based on ancient hunting rituals, has absorbed secondary and apparently relatively late influences from southern "agrarian" cultures (Paproth, *Studien über das Bärenzeremoniell*, pp. 329-330). It is still too early to make definitive statements concerning the archaeology of the Bear Cult in Northeast Asia, but the archaeological evidence on, for instance, the Ainu Bear Festival (*iyomante*), as discussed by Utagawa, points to a very recent origin of some of the material details (Hiroshi Utagawa, "The Archaeology of Iyomante," in William W. Fitzhugh & Chisato O. Dubreuil, eds., *Ainu: Spir-*

From the chronological point of view, it is probable that Hokkaido, where both female shamanism and the institutionalized Bear Cult are attested, was the region reached most recently by both of these phenomena, though by different routes. This means also that the Ainu, especially the Hokkaido Ainu, may well have been the last ethnic group to embrace both of these innovations. This would explain why both features, and especially the Bear Cult, were still until recently part of the living tradition of the Ainu.

---

it of a Northern People (Arctic Studies Center, National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution & University of Washington Press, 1999), pp. 256-260). It would be only natural if the Ainu were the last periphery reached by the more elaborate forms of the Bear Festival, diffused from the continent through the northern route (Amur-Sakhalin-Hokkaido).