

## The Biological Bases of Bear Mythology and Ceremonialism

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Paul Shepard

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The widespread similarities of the rites and stories of the bear, *Ursus arctos*, in the circumpolar northern hemisphere may be an example of cultural diffusion. But if those stories and practices did pass by contact from people to people—or by the movements of peoples—it is likely that new ideas and behaviours were adopted because they found fertile ground in common experience. Alternatively, even if these analogous aspects of the cultures arose independently, it seems probable that their similarities are due to their common origin in observations of the bear itself. Either way, the bear is the object from which an immense, shared body of ceremony and myth arose.<sup>1</sup>

Mythologists rarely ask if there is an actual living referent to the myths they study. It's as though they see the phenomena, which they describe, as the product of sheer, creative imagination. This paper proposes a natural provenance for major features of bear myth and ceremonialism. It suggests that they arose as metaphors based on observations of the bear itself and its natural history.

The logic of these “metaphoric enactments” or rites and stories that personify bears depends on what might be called primal epistemology. At its heart is the belief that the natural world is rich in signs, which are significant to humans—models of exemplary events. As such, they are keys to the meaning of a complex world that arose with the evolution of human self-consciousness and the mental capacity to create a worldview.

Belief in the natural world as a system of cues and signs is characteristic of many tribal peoples who possess a structure of attention in which natural forms are observed not only for practical reasons but because they are perceived as intelligent and spiritual fellow beings. Such a cosmos is itself alive and watchful with a thousand eyes and ears, alert to what the humans do and say. On the one hand, the external world is a feast for the human mind; on the other, it is available for utilitarian purposes. Numerous authors have commented on how difficult it is for us, who are heirs of centuries of disbelief in the tutorial genius of the natural world, or who think of the animals as passive, mindless, and insentient, to understand the acute sensibility of people with a radically different metaphysics, who experience the world as a multifold, living presence.<sup>2</sup>

It is likely, for example, that humans have long believed that the bear's own experience is more like our own than is that of any other animal. This assumption has its origin in its similarity to humans in basic biology and appearance. Its large size, head shape and eye position, bipedal stance, lack of a significant tail, nursing positions, and manual dexterity seem to outweigh and to transcend all those familiar, mammalian traits in which the bear is different from ourselves. Its deliberate movements of head and body suggest to us a life of the mind—of memory, deliberation, and purpose—based on some kind of inner model of the world. This impression is strengthened by the closeness of the bear's niche and ours, that of large omnivores. Food habits dictate the pace and scope of its life, so that characteristic, periodic foraging alternates with rest and play in a way that we find reminiscent of our own lives. For us, bears have distinct personalities, reflecting our own

Perhaps these two aspects of the bear—its anatomical and behavioural likeness to humans in body form, size, gestures, postures, and movements that indicate temperament, intention and character, and its food habits, linked much as our own to seasonal patterns of spatial/temporal distribution—are the keys to its power as an exemplar. At the same time, it is different enough from humans that a translation is necessary. The bear presents perception and consciousness with a degree of ambiguity (similarity with a difference) that is perennially stimulating to the imagination.<sup>3</sup> Unlike the top carnivores of the ecological food and energy matrices, we and the bear are not so narrowly focused. As participants in all the consumer levels we are the slaves of none. The bear is like us in this as no other animal. Its ecological relationships are to the whole of the natural community, and

so, too, are its discernments of the whole, as though standing back like ourselves, to observe. Our kind has watched the bear watching, and recognized a being like us.

Metaphors grow from metonym. That is, human proximity to bears in their shared habitat invites the imagination in all of its forms—dreams, visions, ecstatic trances, and the logical rumination of the sort described by Claude Levi-Strauss in speaking of tribal peoples as astute thinkers and logicians.<sup>4</sup> Metonym is contact and contiguity; the presence of bears in daily life, the uses of its skin, fat, flesh, bones and organs bring it close. Closeness is also kinship. The metaphor of the bear's interpenetration with human life is the poetic myth of genealogical descent. This is the context from which emerges the nearly universal bear mother story—that of the woman who, when the world was young, married a bear, a union from which “we” are descended.<sup>5</sup> Human motherhood is profoundly saturated with this bear-ing. In the Haida carvings of the bear mother we see the melded image of the bear and the human form, a binary figure signifying a reverence for the bear as ancestor, whose family we humans married into at the beginning of the world. The result is that we and bears have important similarities and that the bearish part is a special wisdom.

A different complex of myths and objects, Old European and Greek, also oriented to this intrinsic linkage, anticipates the Western world's repudiation of our animal ancestry. For example, the Vinca figures from sixth millennium BC Romania, part bear and part woman, and some of the Greek stories like that of Callisto who was turned into a bear as punishment, may depict a stage in the dissociation of human kinship with the bear on the advent of Greek humanism.<sup>6</sup> This scenario invites further inquiry into the proposition that the bear-mother stories of northwestern American Indians combined the figures of bear and human in celebration of unity with the animal, while the binary figure of bear and woman in the Mediterranean world represents a stage in the emergence of the anthropomorphic deities from the animal powers, the shedding of their spirit.<sup>7</sup>

In the northern story of the woman who marries a bear, she and her sons are returned to the human village upon the killing of her husband. He, knowing of his coming death, instructs the divine mother and her sons on the rites to be performed. The world's oldest and best-known story is climaxed in this tutorial, an outstanding example of the natural ratification of cultural activities and evidence of the human sense that bears, like the sacred bear, have a special foresight.<sup>8</sup> The story explains that the bear “told” us how to perform those rites that precede, define,

and follow the killing of a bear by hunters, ceremonies that acknowledge both its kinship to humans and its gift of meat and skin.

Thus the story comes before the ceremonies of the slain bear—the complex set of social events, hortatory addresses, ritual dissection, cooking and feasting protocols, distribution of the bear parts, songs, chants and dances of exculpation and participation, liturgical acts, and formalized arrivals and departures that constitute the celebration of the bear's presence in body and spirit. The spirit that accompanies the body of the bear and takes part in or witnesses the rites is given a formal send-off in its circular hegira through the spirit world and later returns as another slain bear. The bear spirit, is believed to be embodied in bears that come into the purview of people, departing at the end of the ceremonies toward the upper valleys onto the slopes of the mountain, much as the den-site-seeking bear does.<sup>9</sup> If all of this sounds fantastic to our ears, it is because it is derived from a different psychology of interpretation. For example, among indigenous peoples wild animals are not usually regarded as individuals in the way that pets are, nor as mere objects, but are typically seen as temporary embodiments of an immortal spirit.<sup>10</sup>

The imminence of the spiritual bear is attested in the sacredness of its name. Sacred beings are not carelessly invoked by their holy name. At one point in some versions of the bear-mother story the maiden, having stepped in bear scat, speaks its name, triggering her subsequent capture and marriage and the birth of the bear-sons. This occurred because she was overheard by bears whose name was taken in vain. Taboos regarding the bear's name may seem merely "superstitious" to the outsider without a significant basis in naturalistic observations. And yet we know that the bears have very acute hearing and become agitated when disturbed by people, even at a distance. The safety of human berry pickers—a routine task of women and the initial setting in the story of the woman who married a bear—may sometimes depend on their ability to move unobtrusively and remain silent. The widespread custom of speaking of the bear only in euphemisms may not have originated simply in reverential feeling so much as people's awareness that they are surrounded by visible and invisible beings. Even among religions that no longer regard animals as having spiritual power, caution about invoking the deity by name may have originated in this way.

Apart from the ceremony of the slain bear, healing and initiation head the list of other rituals in which the "presence" of the bear is invoked. These enacted metaphors probably have their roots also in observations

of bears. Diet and baths are its approach to its own sickness. “Medved,” the Russian word for bear, may have origins in a term that is linguistically connected to “medicine” and to honey. Honey is widely recognized as a major healing substance with many connections to bear lore and a rich symbolism as the sacred food given by their nurses to infant gods and goddesses.<sup>11</sup> Bear doctors and bear elders in tribes as far south as Arizona in America and south to Greece in Eurasia control the rites of transformation, often using bear paraphernalia to bring the bear spirit into the occasion. These transformational events—from illness to health and from child to adult—draw their energy from the larger realm of the bear’s conspicuous biological powers for change. It enters dens just as we go inside our own structures. There some give birth, nurture the young and take them into the world as if their emergence in the spring were a second birth from Mother Earth itself, returning with them into the earth a second and third winter, before separating from them. The inconspicuous sexuality of bears and delayed implantation are factors that phenomenologically conflate to “virgin birth.”

Entering the earth, remaining there in a death-like state, coming forth renewed, and bringing with it newborn, may be the master paradigm upon which many human customs develop as the ritualization of transitions and permutations. Outstanding among these are the funerary traditions of burial, beginning with Neanderthal peoples, who had long experience with both brown and cave bears (*Ursus spelaeus*).<sup>12</sup> The ceremonies of all death and rebirth might be an example of a larger phenomenon, translated metaphorically (that extraordinary mental leap of analogy) for which an ursine object—a bear skin, tooth, or paw—is the talisman. Study of the objects placed in these graves may yet make it possible to ascertain whether the underground passage of the bear was taken as a guide to the formalities such as burial that would insure life after death.<sup>13</sup>

Such stylized enactments of bear behaviour is a “kenning,” a word referring to both “naming” and “knowing,” coming from the same Indo-European root as “cognition,” “connote” and “narrate.” Something is seen, named, referred to, and told first as a story. Modern tribal peoples often say that an animal “taught us” certain things. But “teaching” in a myth may actually have its origin in long, patient observation of actual events and creatures in the natural world.

Many questions remain: How does its natural history relate to the bear in the sky as Ursa Major? Was the bear’s winter “sleep” a presentment, perhaps to be understood as an mimicry of death that confirms an

“awakening”? Why should the bear’s paw be so important a talisman? What specific implications do other anatomical parts have for their ceremonial uses? Are the many 40-day intervals of purification in modern religions related to the denning period of southern bears? Does the lack of human visual sexual identity of bears lend itself to the mythic uses of androgyny? What difference in the observation of bears affect the nature of stories of the man who marries a bear as compared to those of the woman who marries a bear?

This unexplored area connecting the natural history and the mythic concepts of bears offers a rich potential for interdisciplinary research into the meaning of bears in human culture.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Hallowell, 1926.

<sup>2</sup> Nelson, 1983, 292.

<sup>3</sup> Shepard and Sanders, 1985, 243.

<sup>4</sup> Levi-Strauss, 1966, 290.

<sup>5</sup> Barbeau, 1945, 231.

<sup>6</sup> Gimbutas, 1982, 390.

<sup>7</sup> Bullfinch, 1973.

<sup>8</sup> Dioszegi, 1968, 260.

<sup>9</sup> Eliade, 1967.

<sup>10</sup> Vasilevich, 1963.

<sup>11</sup> Travers, 1982.

<sup>12</sup> Kurten, 1971, 140.

<sup>13</sup> Solecki, 1972, 212.