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On Bears, Crosses, and the North: Cultural Semiotic Reflections on Texts from the Lower Palaeolithic to the Present¹

Zusammenfassung:

Der Artikel möchte zur Debatte über die Religionsfähigkeit des Neanderthalers beitragen, insbesondere zu der Frage, ob nicht zumindest einige der in europäischen und transkaukasischen Höhlen gefundenen, paläolithischen Bärenschädel Objekte eines Kultes gewesen und sich die Bärenzeremonielle der heutigen Zeit von einem solchen abgeleitet haben könnten. Ich verfolge zwei semiotische Reihen, die sowohl im älteren und mittleren Paläolithikum wie auch in verschiedenen Jägerkulturen der Gegenwart mit dem Bären verbunden worden sind: das Kreuz und der Norden. Wenngleich die meisten Zeugnisse durch einen Zeitraum von rund 100,000 Jahren voneinander getrennt werden, verweisen uns einige Felsbilder immerhin auch in die Vergangenheit des Mesolithikums. Die rezenten Texte fügen sich - trotz einiger eine historische Differenzierung andeutenden Unterschiede - zu einer logischen Erzählung, die den Bären als ausgeglichenes und ausgleichendes Wesen beschreibt, das am Mittelpunkt der Welt zwischen der materiellen und der geistigen Sphäre unserer Existenz vermittelt.

Abstract:

The article seeks to contribute to the debate about the Neanderthals' capacity of religious thought, particularly to the questions whether at least some of the bear skulls found in European and Transcaucasian caves could have been deposited there as part of Bear-ceremonial activities and whether forms of Bear ceremonialism known today may have descended from this era. It presents two sets of semiotic similarities between materials from the Lower and the Middle Paleolithic in Europe and Transcaucasia, on the one

¹ In appreciation of the two outstanding teachers I have encountered in the course of my dissertation research at the University of Arizona: Dr. N. Scott Momaday in the English Department, who has provided me with major stimuli about Bear, and Classicist Dr. Frank E. Romer, who accompanied me in the process of defining my dissertation topic and who patiently helped me to improve my academic English.

hand, and ethnographies of the past 400 years from hunting cultures of the northern hemisphere, on the other, namely, Bear's association with the cross and with the north. Although the bulk of the evidence is polarized by a time span of approximately 100,000 years, Mesolithic petroglyphs do point us into the past, and the recent ethnographic texts, albeit showing some variation typical of historical processes of divergence, converge into a logical text describing Bear as a balanced and balancing being at the center of the world who mediates between the material and spiritual spheres of our existence.

Résumé:

L'article cherche à contribuer au débat concernant la religion de l'homme de Néanderthal, notamment aux questions si les crânes d'ours que l'on a trouvés dans des cavernes pyrenéennes, alpines, et transcausiennes puissent y avoir été déposés en tant qu'objets d'un culte, et si les rites d'ours pratiqués par des cultures de chasseurs récents peuvent être descendus d'un tel culte. Tirant et de fouilles des âges Paléolithique inférieur et moyen et d'ethnographies écrites il y a 400 ans sur des cultures de chasseurs de l'hémisphère nord, il trace deux séries de similarités sémiotiques, à savoir, l'association de l'ours avec la croix et le nord. Bien que la majorité des actes humains en question soit polarisée par un espace de 100,000 ans, de l'art rupestre mésolithique dirige notre regard vers le passé. Quant aux textes récents, ils se lient dans une narrative logique, dans laquelle l'Ours y est un être équilibré et équilibrant qui établie une liaison entre le sphère matériel et le sphère spirituel de notre existence.

Key words: Neanderthals' capacity of religious thought, Lower and the Middle Paleolithic in Europe and Transcaucasia, ethnographies of the past 400 years from hunting cultures of the northern hemisphere

Introduction

The following notes are a by-product of my comparative research of Bear-ceremonial traditions geared toward an inquiry into the meaning of narratives about Women Who Married A Bear and the age and stability of oral traditions. They are here offered as a contribution to the on-going debate whether bear skulls found in European and Transcaucasian mountain caves could have been deposited there as part of Bear-ceremonial activities and whether forms of Bear ceremonialism known today may have descended from this era (cf. WUNN 1999). Adducing materials from the Lower and the Middle Paleolithic in Europe and Transcaucasia, on the one hand, and ethnographies of the past 400 years from hunting cultures of the northern

² Bear is capitalized and used without an article when I refer to the spirit of the species, or *Artgeist*.

hemisphere, on the other, I am describing two sets of semiotic similarities, namely, Bear's association with the cross and the north.² Considering two petroglyphs that loop from the present into the Mesolithic as well as the migrations that must be underlying a number of very similar oral traditions and some of which must have occurred as early as in the Upper Paleolithic, I regard them as evidence for the continuity of Bear-ceremonial traditions from the Lower Paleolithic into the present.

The Cross

The earliest potentially Bear-ceremonial site of which I know is Azikh Cave, a limestone cave near Fuzuli in southwestern Azerbaijan. In its Acheulian layer (which works a transition from the Lower to the Middle Paleolithic in the period of ca 500,000-100,000 BP), Huseinov discovered the jawbone of a female of the Neanderthal type dated to 350,000-400,000 BP, and, in the vicinity of a hearth, skulls of cave bears (hitherto undated?) two of which had a cross either drawn or notched on them and two jawbones cut in halves to form a cross (MUSTAFAYEV 1996, n.p.). This motif of the cross reoccurs at Pestera Rece, or 'Cold Cave,' in the Roumanian Bihor Mountains, where LASCU (1996, 18) found four bear skulls from the Middle Paleolithic dated to 85,000 BP and looking as if they had been arranged in the shape of a cross.

Arguing that in the glacial era of the Middle Paleolithic, Pestera Rece would have been much too far from human settlements and much too difficult to reach for the „mere“ purpose of a hunting ceremony, and that this would also contradict everything that has been observed in more recent cultures, WUNN (1999, 5.23) seems to believe that this arrangement of bear skulls is the work of natural causes, such as water currents. I disagree.

For one, I think that the Neanderthals were in all likelihood better adapted to a glacial environment than humans of our era are. Coming from Cultural Studies with a special interest in Native American Studies, I also know that in traditional Native American cultures, respect of the game animals has been very important, and that one way of showing it would be by returning their remains to their home. In Alaska, the Yakutat Tlingit take a bear's head „back... They bury it with the face toward the mountain. ... Then they sing a song to it. ... They have respect for it.“ (ANON. in DELAGUNA 1972, 824). In the Southwest, Puebloans would take a slain bear first to their village, where various ceremonies transform it from foe to friend, then take its skull to a shrine (HALLOWELL 1926, 77, citing Parsons) located on a hill or inside a mountain cave more or less remote from the village. Physical hardship is no reason to cancel an undertaking considered worthwhile, especially if it has a spiritual component to it, be it a vision quest, a sun dance, or a pilgrimage for salt. Thence, I don't think that climbing the very same mountain hunters may have climbed to kill the bear in the first place would be deemed too much of an ordeal. The same may have been true of Neanderthal hunters.

Two, the cross of skulls at Pestera Rece may not only take up a design which has been found at the Azikh Cave in three variations, but that all four crosses from the Lower and Middle Paleolithic anticipate Bear's association with the cross in several recent Eurasian and North American cultures. These cultures include the Skolt-Saami, who have traditionally occupied the Kola Peninsula of Scandinavia, the Kets along the northern Yenisei River in Siberia, the Tlingits in Alaska, the Tsimshians in northern British Columbia, the artists of a petroglyph in Wyoming, the Ho-Chungra in Wisconsin, the Zunis in New Mexico, and the Dinés in Arizona and New Mexico. In all instances, the cross appears as an attribute of the Bear - signifying the Bear, communicating to the bear the mythical propriety of the action, or effecting a (protective?) identification with Bear.

This is particularly clear in descriptions of the Skolt-Saami's bear hunt and feast, which is patterned with crosses. To communicate to the other hunters that he had found the den of a bear, a hunter would place two logs in the shape of a cross on the hearth (ITKONEN 1946, 317, in PACHER 1997, 319), a gesture that may respond to the wide-spread belief that bears have very good ears, and that one must not speak of the bear if the hunt is to be successful. At the den, the Saami hunters - as well as their Ob-Ugrian colleagues in western Siberia - would poke at the bear with poles that had to be crossed (ITKONEN 1946, 218). This procedure has also been documented in a photograph of 1910 (ZACHRISSON & IREGREN 1974, 82, in PACHER 1997, 323), and a petroglyph from Bossekop (Nyheim?), Finnmark, in central Norway, dated to 4200-3600 B.C. (EVERS 2004, 18). When the bear so rudely awakened would angrily put its head outside the den, the hunters would kill it with the blow of an ax. Then, they would take the slain bear to the village on a sledge. As Thurenus and Schefferus write in the 17th century, Skolt-Saami would use the red juice of the alder bark to put a cross on the forehead of the hunter who killed the bear and on that of the lead reindeer and on the forehead of the hunter (HOLMBERG 1925, 12. 13). Rheen, another author from the 17th century, reports that their women would sew crosses on a piece of cloth - one for each bear that was slain - and that these were hung around the neck of all hunters who participated in the hunt (HOLMBERG 1925, 13). In the course of the ensuing ceremony, the bear would be hosted, its flesh eaten, and its spirit sent home by placing its skull into a tree outside the village. Somewhere during the feast, hunters „in Finland“ (who might be either Saami or Finns) reportedly drew a cross of bear blood on a pine tree and shot at it to find out who would get the next bear (HOLMBERG 1925, 33, citing KROHN).

Hunters of the Kurika Kets put a post in the ground at the location where they killed the bear and on it put personalized versions of a cross on it: an even-sided cross, a lop-sided cross, or a cross-like assembly of four triangles (ALEXEJENKO 1963, 199).

Tlingit hunters have been instructed in a narrative of a Woman Who Married A Bear as follows: „When they stretch my skin, put charcoal between the shoulder blades. And on my back - put a cross on the skin side“ (JAKE JACKSON in MCCLELLAN 1970, 21). Tsimshian hunters have received a similar

instruction in a similar narrative: „[W]hen the skin was dried then put the red-ore at back from head to tail, and put also red-ore across under arms“ (TATE 1993, 38).

In Wyoming, a petroglyph shows two bear tracks with a cross inside (ROCKWELL 1991, 71).

In Wisconsin, the Ho-Chungra (formerly called Winnebago) connote Bear with the four cardinal winds and say that Earthmaker placed them in the four directions as Island Weights to help stop the world from spinning (FUNMAKER 1986, in DIETERLE 1999-2005). Their locations could be connected by a cross.

In New Mexico, the Zunis have a shield that shows a bear with one cross in front of it and three crosses behind (ROCKWELL 1991, 104).

Legends of the Dinés (Navajo) in Arizona and New Mexico tell about a monster bear who it had its cave in a mountain butte with four entrances, one in each of the four directions (ANON. in MATTHEWS 1897, 124-5). We may surmise that the shape of the cave, entranceways included, was that of a cross.

The North

Another remarkable circumstance about the assembly of bear skulls at Pestera Rece is that one of them - and it is the only one lying upside down in a „norma ventralis“ position - points exactly to the magnetic north (LASCU 1996, 18). Bear is also associated with the north at the Grotte de Bruniquel in the French Pyrenees, where a circle of broken stalagmites opens in the north to admit a fireplace with burned bear bones dated to 48,000 BP (ROSENDAHL 1998, 65).

A fireplace in the north is not surprising and yet noteworthy at the same time. Never being directly exposed to the sun, the north is naturally the coldest part of a place, and so it is not unusual to see hearths along the northern wall of a building. But would this matter inside a cave such as the Grotte de Bruniquel? Or are we dealing here with evidence of artistic mimesis? Excluding the possibility that the northern location of the fireplace at Bruniquel is a sheer coincidence, I recall that many cultures connote the north with night, darkness, winter, and death. These connotations may have been transferred from the world outside the cave, in which the macrocosmos had been experienced and described, to a ceremonial, microcosmic landscape inside the cave.

Such a possibility is buoyed up by a large body of recent Eurasian and North American texts that connote Bear with human death. This death is not terminal but constitutes a phase of renewal. Anthropomorphic, bears suggest that there may be a flip side to human existence. Hibernating, they live in accordance with the regenerative pattern of the wilderness. Larger than human - a cave bear standing on its hind legs would loom 3 meters tall - they lend authority to the wilderness, which is considered a space of human regeneration, especially in the spiritual sense of allowing us to see, and be, who we are.

a very balanced and balancing being at the center of the world located under the North Star. If we may believe the finds at Azikh Cave and Pestera Rece, there is a possibility that Neanderthals conceived of this image around 100,000 years ago.

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