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SKY BEAR RESEARCH: IMPLICATIONS FOR “CULTURAL ASTRONOMY”

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines research carried out to date on the Sky Bear and seeks to demonstrate the implications of this line of research for “cultural astronomy”. It begins by reviewing research that has been done cross-culturally on bear ceremonialism, focusing on the role of circumpolar stars, Dipper stars and stars adjacent to them, and how they came to be integrated, cognitively, into an over-arching cosmology shared by different hunter-gatherer populations across the N. Hemisphere. Next, using three mutually reinforcing ethnographic datasets, the manner in which, specifically in Europe, this archaic worldview, characterized by embodied reciprocity, allowed humans, animals and nature to be bound together. The cosmology, grounded in the belief that humans descended from bears, integrated skyscape and landscape into a single interlocking reality. Furthermore, the worldview can be understood as embodying a “relational epistemology” or “relational ecology”. This more culturally-informed approach coincides with the goals of “cultural astronomy” as well as the methodology and goals of the emerging field of archaeological ethnography. The reasons that these particular sky resources were chosen to project this set of spiritual beliefs skyward are also addressed. In the final section I suggest that the skyscape acts a kind of mnemonic device. As such, it is a cognitive resource, readily available to the social collective in question, which can act as a repository for past beliefs. Anchoring key components of a cosmology in the stars above allows the resulting skyscape to act as an enduring “memory bank”. In short, the datasets analyzed facilitate the reconstruction of a European-wide ethno-cultural substrate that points to an archaic relational cosmology and the belief that humans descended from bears as well as providing evidence for the way that skyscape and landscape were integrated into this cosmology.

KEYWORDS: Ursa major, bear ceremonialism, carnival, relational ecology, Bear’s Son tale, archaeological ethnography, Good-Luck Visits, circumpolar stars.

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past hundred years, significant research has been carried out cross-culturally on bear ceremonialism as well as on how the Dipper stars and stars adjacent to them came to be integrated, cognitively, into an over-arching cosmivision shared by different hunter-gatherer populations across the N. Hemisphere (Hagar, 1900; Hallowell, 1926; Speck, 1945). At the same time, there have been repeated attempts to define an entity called “cultural astronomy” (Iwaniszewski, 1991, 1995; Rappenglück, 2009; Ruggles & Saunders, 1993).

Furthermore, in recent years research on bear ceremonialism has charted the way-faring and time-telling strategies attached to these stars which have ended up being passed on from generation to generation, often woven into sacred narratives shared by the members of the same hunter-gatherer populations (Berezkin, 2005; d’Huy, 2012; Frank, 2014a, 2014b). For example, among circumpolar peoples, there is substantial evidence for an entrenched belief in an ursine ancestor. We find this bear ancestor represented as a kind of divinity whose dwelling place is located in the heavens above, often in the same amorphous manner that Christian believers conceptualize God: as residing in the sky above, but without specifying exactly where his abode actually is. At other times the ursine cosmology is associated with hunting narratives and projected onto specific sets of circumpolar stars.

Moreover, there is increasing evidence that a similar cosmology was at work in Europe which evolved from a similar set of environmental circumstances existing in times past. At the core of this cosmology is the belief that humans descended from bears. Until recently investigations into bear ceremonialism and the projection of its associated cosmology skyward have focused on N. Hemisphere manifestations of this belief system, particularly among populations whose mode of subsistence is, at least in many respects, still similar to that of hunter-gatherers of times past who inhabited the same geographical zones.

Now that attention has turned to reconstructing the cognitive and cultural factors that led Europeans to create a skyscape with a bear at its center, these investigations have become a source of analogical reference. Similarly, in the case of Europe the belief in a bear ancestor would appear to harken back to a forager mentality, at least to one that was not compatible with a pastoral-agro mode of subsistence. In short, this European-wide ethno-cultural substrate is one that points to an archaic relational ontology founded on the belief that humans descended from

bears. As will be shown, it opens a window onto the cognitive prehistory of European peoples.

2. EMBODIED RECIPROCITY

In contrast to this culturally informed interpretive approach, many attempts have been made to project, quite literally, the image of a bear onto the stars of Ursa Major as if the resulting putative resemblance was sufficient to explain how a bear came to be associated with these circumpolar stars, especially the Dipper stars.



Figure 1. *Ursa Major as depicted in Urania's Mirror, a set of constellation cards published in London c.1825.*

As we will see, the older worldview was characterized by embodied reciprocity where humans, animals and nature were bound together. The resulting cosmology is one that researchers have referred to as a kind of “relational ecology” (Betts et. al., 2015), “relational epistemology” (Bird-David, 1999), or “relational ontology” (Hill, 2011). In this respect, Betts, et al. (2015) and Watts (2013) also speak of the need to pursue a “relational archaeology”.

In line with these proposals and the increasing interest in the relationship between “landscape” and “skyscape”, I suggest we place more emphasis on the relational nature of human interactions with the *environment*, understood in its broadest distributed sense and that includes engaging with other-than-human animals, like bears, which in times past not only inhabited essentially all of Europe, in most zones they were actually more numerous than their human animal offspring.

3. THREE DATASETS: INTERCONNECTED AND MUTALLY REINFORCING

Three basic types of interlocking datasets are found across Europe relating to the belief that humans descended from bears. They are:

1. The Bear's Son tales, the most wide-spread motif in European folklore
2. The identification of the “King of Carnival” with the Bear's Son

3. Analogies with historically documented as well as extant beliefs concerning bear ceremonialism and the Celestial Bear among circumpolar peoples, especially Finno-Ugric peoples, e.g., the Khanty of western Siberia

3.1. *Bear's Son Tales: Orally transmitted narratives*

Of late, research has focused on a figure who is half-human, half-bear, his mother is a human female while his father is a bear. The figure of this intermediary being is a central component of this much earlier worldview grounded on the belief in an ursine ancestry. At the same time, the story of the birth, life and exploits of this character is found in a myriad of European folktales, known collectively as the "Bear's Son Tale".

Moreover, in the Pyrenean zone, the "Bear Fests" celebrated each year¹ still incorporate elements taken from the Bear's Son Tale, reenacting, for instance, the initial encounter between his mother and father and his subsequent birth in the bear cave (Alford, 1930; Lajoux, 1996; Pauvet, 2012). While this motif represents the most widely disseminated European folktale, until the belief that humans descended from bears was plugged into the interpretative frame of these tales, they were not viewed as particularly significant.

3.2. *European Carnival: Performance transmitted narratives*

More recently, evidence has surfaced which links this "Jesus-Bear"—as one of my informants called him—to the character who dies, is mourned and is resurrected during Carnival. More specifically there is evidence that in Europe the so-called "King of Carnival" is actually an embodiment of this intermediary being, a topic treated in depth in a recently published monograph (Frank, 2015). This also suggests that the older layer of pre-Christian belief in which Carnival is embedded comes from this ursine informed ethno-cultural substrate. It also suggests that Carnival itself, as well as pre-Christian beliefs concerning February 2, known as "Bear Day" or Candlemas, should be traced back to this same archaic cosmology (Lajoux, 1996; Pauvert, 2012, 2014).

"Good Luck Visits" conducted with a retinue that regularly includes a human dressed as a bear also take place all across Europe throughout the Winter and Spring carnival periods (Bertolotti, 1992; Frank, 2008a, 2008b, 2009). These house visits are still part of traditional social practice in many locations where they often take place on December 5th and 6th.² They are still popularly believed to insure good health, promote fertility in animals and humans alike as

well as guarantee the fruitfulness of crops. In short, their purpose has been viewed as prophylactic: they are intended to bring about the well-being of those visited.



Figure 2. The "bear" of Saint Laurent de Cerdans, Pyrenees, France. Fréger (2012: 226).

Many other remarkable examples of contemporary European Bear performers, dressed in straw, fur and plant materials, who take part in European Winter and Spring carnivals have been photographed by Charles Fréger (2012) and are available for viewing online at <http://www.charlesfreger.com/portfolio/wilder-mann/>. Meanwhile it is important to note that Fréger, in his photographic study of the European performers, writes the following concerning the figure of the "Wild Man", known in German as *Wilder Mann* and in French as *L'Homme sauvage*. His comments are based on the pan-European folktale called the Bear's Son, who is

according to legend a son born of the union of a bear and a woman, whether by consent or not. Belonging to two worlds and knowing the intricacies of both, this mythological being is considered a 'superhero' [...]. In most cases the Wild Man wears a costume made of natural materials or animal skins, his face is rendered unrecognizable, either by a mask or by a costume that covers him entirely, or by a black make-up. An accessory —a stick, a club or something similar— and one or more bells complete his outfit. (Fréger, 2012: 243)



Figure 3. An Austrian Krampus. Fréger (2012: 21).

The double-souled nature of this figure, half bear and half human, allowed it to be conceived as a kind of intermediary being who bridged the connection between humans and their bear ancestors. This has a parallel in Christianity where a similar role is played by Jesus Christ, born of a human female but whose father was the Holy Spirit, in short, an intermediary, partly human and partly divine.



Figure 4. *Sourvakari, Bulgaria. Fréger (2012: 166).*

However, there is a major difference in that the older ursine cosmology appears to be one in which real human beings, properly dressed, fulfilled this role, the role of intermediary, watching over the community, both in a physical and spiritual sense. Hence, Good Luck Visits were performances that were intended to insure the well being of the members of each community. In these performances in which the humans, dressed as bear-humans, that is, donning special clothing, as if they, too, were dual-natured beings, carried out their duties vis-à-vis the community. However, far from being lost in mists of time, Good Luck Visits continue to be celebrated in many parts of Europe.³

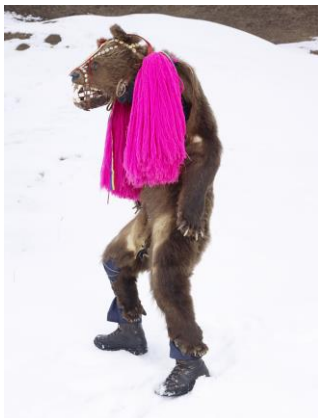


Figure 5. *Ursul (Bear), Romania. Fréger (2012: 71).*

These survivals harken back to the view that bears were ancestors of humans. While the struggle

of the medieval Church against the deeply entrenched belief in this ursine intermediary is well documented, efforts to eradicate the old belief system were not totally successful. As Pastoureau explains, even after Christianization, the old beliefs continued to circulate:

Indeed, in a large part of non-Mediterranean Europe in the Carolingian period, the bear continued to be seen as a divine figure, an ancestral god whose worship took on various forms but remained solidly rooted, impeding the conversion of pagan peoples. Almost everywhere, from the Alps to the Baltic, the bear stood as a rival to Christ. (Pastoureau, 2011: 3)

3.3. Sources of analogy: Research on the role of the Sky Bear in Finno-Ugric cultures

Over the past fifty years the ursine relational cosmology along with its various celestial projections has been investigated in depth, most extensively among the Saami, Finnish and Khanty with the latter still practicing Bear Fests (Pentikäinen, 2007; Sarmela, 2006; Schmidt, 1989).



Figure 5. *Finno-Ugric Languages.*

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Finno-Ugric_languages.

There are indications that a similar ursine belief was present among other circumpolar peoples across N. Eurasia (Anisimov, 1963; Lushnikova, 2002; Sokolova, 2000). Moreover, a number of insights can be drawn based on well attested cognitive parallels associated with circumpolar bear ceremonialism. For instance, in the ursine cosmology documented for the Khanty people of western Siberia, the sacred narrative speaks of a celestial Sky Bear ancestor who dwells in the heavens above. It is the son (or daughter) of the Sky Bear who comes down to Earth explicitly to teach humans how to behave, treat each other and nature properly and carry out the necessary "sending home" ceremony performed for the souls of individual earthly bears slain by hunters (Shepard, 2007; Shepard & Sanders, 1992; Schmidt, 1989).

The "sending home" ceremony was needed so that the earthly bear could report back to the Sky Bear concerning the behavior of its human offspring. (Frank, in press; Frank & Silva, 2012). In this respect, given that the figure of the European Bear's Son has also been identified with the "King of Carnival" who dies, is mourned and is resurrected, there is reason to believe that the pan-European version of this ursine belief system contained a similar narrative motif (Bertolotti, 1992, 1994; Frank, 2015; Pauvert, 2012).

4. FURTHER INSIGHTS INTO THE SKY BEAR COSMOLOGY

But we are still left with a question: why associate a divinity in the form of a bear ancestor with circumpolar stars such as those of the Big Dipper? The well-known astronomer Ed Krupp who is also one of the foremost historians of astral myths, wrote the following about Ursa Major, however, without any awareness of the belief in an ursine ancestor:

Because real bears hibernate, they are symbols of renewal and seasonal change. They represent the immortal spirit of life. We don't have a bear in the northern sky because the stars there look like a bear. The celestial bear prowls around the pole, performs a seasonal death and returns to life when the world does. It is a celestial power-house, and the energy churned out by this revolving dynamo in the sky seems to activate the entire world. The celestial bear performs another one of those necessary sacrifices that ensure the perpetuation of life—this time in the northern sky. By dying, the celestial bear lives forever. (Krupp, 1991: 239-240)

Then we have the well-known nature writer Paul Shepard (1995) who made these cogent observations about the association of a bear with these circumpolar stars:

The motion of the stellar hemisphere, which to later, agricultural civilizations suggested grindstones and other wheels, turned by some invisible hand, may have been very differently interpreted by earlier peoples, as the heavenly, unitary spectacle of the dynamic process or energy system that animates life itself, of which in diurnal experience we see only fragments. ... The 'cult of the sacred bear' seems to be much larger than a local theriophany, indeed, to be a complex, multiform, ancient metaphysics.

In this sense we might view the skyscape as a kind of mnemonic device. As such, it is a cognitive resource, readily available to the social collective in question, which can act as a repository for archaic beliefs. Anchoring key components of a cosmology in the stars above allows the resulting skyscape to

act as an enduring "memory bank". In this way traces of past beliefs and social practices are perpetuated across time. It would appear that the circumpolar stars, especially those of the Big Dipper, have functioned in a similar fashion.

5. CONCLUSIONS

What is most remarkable to me is the discovery of the staying power, that is, the cognitive resilience of beliefs and social practices attached to the Sky Bear, bear ceremonialism and its associated relational ontology. All across the N. Hemisphere these beliefs have served to bind together humans and bears, landscape and skyscape, utilizing the stars of the Big Dipper and stars nearby to illustrate and hence help insure the transmission of this aspect of the ursine belief system from one generation to the next (Frank, 2014a, 2014b, in press).⁴ And this is also true of Europe. As we have seen, these conceptual linkages are particularly striking, even today, once we begin to investigate the European ethnographic materials, both past and present. In short, the cosmology in question has left an indelible mark on the culture of Europeans.

Finally, if we are to take the term "cultural astronomy" seriously we need to pay attention to the role of culture in the creation, understanding and projection of skyscapes, and in this instance, in the choices that led people to conceptualize their bear ancestor as dwelling in the sky above them. Also, as we have seen, the worldview in question was characterized by embodied reciprocity: humans, animals and nature were bound together. Consequently, the cosmology is one that we can define as epitomizing a kind of "relational ecology" which, in turn, speaks to us about the need to pursue a "relational archaeology". At the same time this more culturally-informed approach, one that blends data from the past and present, coincides with the methodology and goals of the emerging field of archaeological ethnography (Hamilakis & Anagnostopoulos, 2009).

In summary, cultural astronomy provides a more cognitively-oriented approach that in this case allows for the recognition that among hunter-gatherer cultures the landscape and the skyscape were interlocking realities, each of which provided a way to structure and project the fundamental beliefs of the cultural group in question, beliefs and social practices that quite remarkably have survived, albeit in a fragmented form, into the 21st century.

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¹ Perhaps the most remarkable Bear Fests still celebrated today are found in three remote Pyrenean villages. Although in centuries past, their existence was rarely noted, today modern technology makes them readily available to the researcher. The villages are: 1) Prats de Mollo, "Enquête d'Ailleurs : La fête de l'ours" ["A survey from elsewhere: The bear festival"] (filmed in 2015), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bs0xfwYx4lE&app=desktop>; 2) Arles sur Tech, "La fête de l'ours" ["The bear festival"] (filmed in 2010), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RHlIttofhBIE>; 3) Saint Laurent de Cerdans, "Fête de l'Ours" ["The bear festival"] (filmed in 2015), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xi_xGbliKLQ.

² The amalgam of pre-Christian and Christian elements is clear in the traditional outings of "straw-bears" and their retinues, a commonplace scene in Bavaria on December 5th and 6th, as shown in these videos. Bavaria, especially Berchtesgaden, is a location where conducting visits to the houses of the village is still a central component of the performance: "Alpendämonen - Maskenlauf in Berchtesgaden" ["Alpine Demons: Mask Running in Berchtesgaden"] (filmed in 2012), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XXq073okUll>, and "Der Nikolaus mit seinen Buttnmandl in Bischofswiesen" (2015 12 05) ["Nicholaus with his Buttnmandl (Straw Bears) in Bischofswiesen"]. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uggy9KE6cP4https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YV4pt6NZWdQ>. A more urban setting is found in this video entitled "Buttnmandllaufen Berchtesgaden [Buttnmandl und Kramperl]" (filmed in 2015), dedicated to the running of the Buttnmandl straw bears and their handlers, the Kramperl, in Berchtesgaden, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=joaZfZLnFCQ>.

³ Good Luck Visits are also popular at this time of year in the Frisian Waddeneilanden, islands off the coast of The Netherlands, for example, in the carnival of Sunderum in the municipality of Terschelling: "Sunderum Terschelling 6 december 2012" ["The Festival of Sunderum, Terschelling"], <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nHqkUvmj2OY>.

⁴ Although outside the scope of this study, another avenue that is still open to investigation is the degree to which the Sky Bear ancestor was perceived by the social collective in a gendered fashion, that is, as a male or female. Shepard (1985) has suggested that in the oldest stratum of this cosmology the ancestral figure may have been conceptualized as a Mother Bear, a belief that could have had its continuation in the gendering of Ursa Major (Lanciano & Tutino (2005). However, given the range of variations found in N. Hemisphere bear ceremonialism, it is still too early for us to reach a definitive conclusion in this respect. Indeed, whereas a mythical Mother Bear is common in narrative and iconic representations, it is far less common to find circumpolar stars themselves associated with her as opposed to their utilization to portray action scenes with motifs related to hunting (Barbeau, 1946; Berezkin, 2005; Lushnikova, 2000).