

The Relics of the Bear's Cult among the Selkups

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The Selkup people like many other peoples of the North had many different gods or spirits because they believed that every object in the world had its own spirit as every man had his own soul. The classification of the Selkup gods was done by K. DONNER during his travel to Siberia. Besides the highest god who had created the world and men there were other popular gods: those who existed everywhere; those who presented ancestors; purely local gods; and finally those whom one ordinarily calls household gods (1).

The bear as the most important god was honored on the Tym and the Ket because the Selkups believed that the man could stem from animal ancestors, and namely from bear (1) (2). The bear was honored by the Selkups in two aspects: 1) as an animate bear, the inhabitant of the siberian tayga; 2) as the most important spirit, former sky inhabitant and the ancestor of all people on the earth (3). G. I. PELIKH marks that according to the first aspect the bear worshiping was founded on the belief in kinship between the soul of the man and the bear. After the man's death his soul installs itself in the bear's body, but after the bear's death it turns into the man's soul again.

The bear had a special status among other animals, because it is equipped with human attributes and the Selkups believed in the metamorphosis of men into the bear and the converse. Some hints are found in the perceived similarities of way as humans do. Its anatomy to some extent resembles humans. The bear can walk on his hind legs and his front paws he uses as arms. The bear understands the Selkup speech and he will never touch the man if one asks him about it in the Selkup language. Elizabeth Sychina from the village of Ivankino (Middle Ob) tells that her father once met a bear face to face and he said to the bear: „*Qajqo mekka tömmand? Čadžlend onž wattout!*” (Why have you come to me? Go your own way!) In answer the bear roared at him, then jumped aside and went off. A similar plot is described in the story of the hunter M. S. Karelin from Ust-Ozernoje (Upper-Ket). During his sleep the hunter felt that somebody was pulling him by the legs. He awoke in horror and saw a bear. Karelin cried: „*Kutt'a mazin ürilbandi: Üttel'd'in r'urrovin!*” (Where are you pulling me? Leave me alone!). The bear let his legs fall and ran along the sand.

The Selkup people have always kept notion about genetic ties between the man and the bear. According to one of the legends which was spread on the Tym, one man went to the forest and got lost there. He began to live with bears, hence bears took after the man. The tale-teller E. Sychina gave the other interpretation of the origin of the bear's kin: „One Selkup woman lost her way in the forest and she met a bear there. She became his wife and soon gave birth to a child – a bear's cub. That is way bears understand the Selkup speech. No wonder that the terms of relationship are used as substitutes for the Selkup name „*qorq*” (bear). The descent of the bear's kin on the Tym river called the bear „*man midami*” (my younger brother). On the Tas and Baich one can meet the same address (4). The ethnographer R. URAJEV also marked on the Tym the address towards the bear in the form „*ötčügä*” (lad) (5). On the Middle Ob the bear is called „*warg ara*” (great old man) up till now. In this way people want to underline the wisdom and strength of the bear. In some places along the River Ket people use the words „*ira*” and „*paja*”,

they mean „husband” and „wife”, or „old man” and „old woman”. The bear is often called „ildika” – grandfather or „ild'akoti” grandfather, grannie (Karelino, Losinoborskoye), or „ilča” (Kellog), „ild'a” (Markovo) – old man. Among other names are: „surum” – animal (Belayarovka), „warga surum” – great animal (Starosondrovo). Such names were also fixed on the Ket as „nid'a” – bear's cub (it can be compared with the analogous word in kamasiian language „nid'a” – child) and „mal žu” – old bear.

The Selkup notion about the bear as a great spirit is preserved in some fragments of legends and ceremonies.

According to the horizontal concept about the world the bear dwelt in the upper world, e. g. in the South guarding the home of „the old woman of life” – *Iljiny Kota*. Giving these data E. D. PROKOFEVA writes about half-men and half-bears that testifies about close connection of the Selkups with this totem. In the younger, vertical projection of the world the bear is the dweller of the lower world. He appears in two images: 1) mammoth-bear, who guards the entrance to the lower world inside the earth; 2) half-bear and half-man, who guards the home of *Iljiny Kota*, the patroness of life (4). M. SHATILOV, describing Pygin yourts on the Ob, remarked that in the notion of the Selkup people the bear had seemed to be the dweller of the sky and they worshipped him as God's son (6).

The relics of various ceremonies which were spread once among the Selkups testify about reverence of the bear as a great spirit.

Probably there existed the bear's feast on the Tym and on the Ket. E. D. PROKOFEVA gives the description of some elements of this ceremony. Some fragments of the same ceremony are met in the travelling notes of M. SHATILOV and expedition accounts of R. URAEV, in the works of I. N. GEMUEV.

Let's try to connect these fragments together to get more complete idea of this cult. The Selkup people on the Tym had some feast devoted to catching a great animal including the bear. When people found the bear's den, they hung a kerchief on the tree nearby to cajole the bear's spirit. When hunters killed the bear they first of all performed a ritual dance round him, shouting or calling out and imitating ravens: „Kuk, kuk!”. After that they arranged the bear's funeral feast. The bear's paws (arms and legs) and the skin were placed on the table and the bear's head was set above them. If they happened to kill a she-bear, her head was decorated with beads, ribbons and rags. If a he-bear was killed the people made a toy bow and arrow and placed them near the bear. Then people boiled the meat. But before eating it they addressed the bear with the following words: „Sgilagil kurip, üdem mödogu” (We will pray for the dead (bear), we'll drink wine). The bear's meat, gall and blood demanded special treatment. In the Tym district it was forbidden to sell the bear's meat. If the hunter sold the meat to anyone, the bear could kill the hunter. But the hunter could exchange the meat for some things without any risk (5). Many Selkups don't eat bear's meat at all – it is a relic of one more taboo, connected with the bear's cult, because the bear is almost a man, born from a Selkup woman. This taboo in the same way as the taboo in hunting was observed in the region of the River Tym. The taboo led to the spread of bears in 1920–1930. There appeared a great number of bears and they caused a considerable damage to the Selkup economy. The presence of the bear in this region is reflected in the place name *Kargasok*, which is meant „the bear's cape” (*qorqi* „bear”, *sok* „cape”) (4).

G. I. PELIKH describes a certain Selkup „law” which censures anybody for killing accidentally met bears. But at the same time the law obliges a Selkup to kill the bear in case if „he goes against the man” (attacks the man). It can be explained by the fact that the bear being a close relative to the man addresses the Selkup and asks him for help, asks the man to kill him and through this

action his soul becomes free and goes to the upper world. In this way the bear forces to kill him and the hunter is obliged to give him this favour (3).

The bear's skull played a special role in the ceremonies. The skull was preserved and sometimes was placed on a pole and set on the river bank or on the edge of the forest. The bear's skull could be placed in a special cult huts among different things brought by religious people as sacrifice. M. SHATILOV found the bear's skull in one of the sacred huts of the Pyjins. There a half-ruined icon and the bear's skull were found. Both things were decorated with bits of stuff, laces and ear-rings. In the same place there was a sacrificial kettle. To M. SHATILOV's mind this sacred place carries us to very ancient times when the beginning of christianity was combined with the veneration of the bear (6).

From oral information of the Selkup people fixed by the ethnographer R. URAEV, we learn that the Selkup people who belonged to the kin of the bear carved from the whole piece of the larch tree. The bear was depicted in a standing position with a slightly raised head. Among the cult collections of Kulaevo, described by R. URAEV, there are also some symbols of the bear. Only one bear out of the six is depicted in a normal bear's position, e. g. on all his fours. The rest are presented standing on their hind legs together with the man. It is notable that the bear in all these symbols embraces the man by his shoulders; the man's figure is represented in such a position that shows horror and fright before the bear. R. URAEV made a supposition that the bears of Kulai depicted together with the man go back to the beginning of the bear's cult. The origin of this cult might have been caused by the difficulties of hunting the bear. This animal was attached supernatural force: the bear could punish for certain sins. Perhaps these carved groups depict people who had been punished by the bear according to mystic notions of Siberian people (7).

So we can conjecture that in Selkup tradition the bear is not just equal but superior to humans. The belief in supernatural force of the bear was reflected in shamanism of the Selkup people and in shaman's attributes. G. I. PELIKH describes shaman-foretellers (*gwel'djat gula*) who put the bear's mask on their faces and the bear's paws on the arms and legs during the worshipping ceremony. People believed in the possibility of turning shamans into bears (8).

The traditional beliefs of the Selkup people included the idea of turning not only shaman-foretellers into the bear but ordinary people as well: every bear possessed a soul of any of their ancestors. This belief is linked with the tradition, described by I. N. GEMUEV, to „throw the bear's paw” and in this way to foretell who of the dead oldman has turned into that bear. A special role in turning into the bear belonged to the thumb which concentrated people's souls and the shaman strength. This belief is connected with the penalty to depict the thumb on one or two paws of the bear. This idea is supported by the archeological findings (9).

In Selkup mythology the name „*shelab*” is used as a substitute for „*qorq*” (bear) or its synonym. The Selkups have an idea that *Shelab* is a complex creature, its image reflects terrestrial and celestial features. The bear entered the cult of *Shelab* as the personification of the male strength and his function included the protection and fecundation of the heavens and earth. Because of this role of the bear in the Selkup mythology G. I. PELIKH links the word „*korg*” with „*kor*” (male), and refers the words „*kvekor*” (sturgeon), „*kor*” (white salmon, woodpecker, stallion) to the same etymological group (3). Unfortunately materials of Selkup dialects and other samoyedic languages do not give ground to confirm this alluring connection. Selkup dialectal forms „*qorqi*” (Tas), „*qorgi*” (Chijapka), „*qoriq*” (Parabel), „*qorq*” (Ivankino), „*qwirgi*” (Ust-Ozernoye), „*qverga*” (Maksimkin Yar) go back to pre-samoyedic form *wârkkâ. The Selkup forms „*qori*” (Tas), „*qor*” (Narym) developed from pre-samoyedic **kora* (10).

The relics of the bear's cult are traced in placenames and antroponimy. The names of settlements, small villages and small rivers often have the component „qorq-“, for example: „kuorgaikī“ – the bear's river (this name was given to the River Ket in the village of Makovski); „korga“ – bear (this is the name of the right tributary of the River TamyrSAT; the right tributary of the River Chusik; the left tributary of the River Keng); „qorgil' qīga“ – the bear's rivulet (it flows near Polto) (11).

The Selkup personal names with the component „korg“ are known from the 17th century. The name *Korga* was met in the book of person's names of the Selkup people of the Narym jail. The tribal name of „qorq“ was adopted to the patronimic *Kargalini* (12).

Thus, the relics of the bear's cult among the Selkup people are displayed in: 1) the form of the bear's feat; 2) hunting ceremonies; 3) a special attitude of people towards the bear. These forms include all etno-linguistic-archaeological complex: Selkup lexicon, mythology, ethnographical data, archaeological findings, toponimic and antroponimic terms.

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