

Bears and Humans

Zoltan Nagy

Department of European Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology, University of Pecs, Hungary
nagy.zoltan@pte.hu

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-0522-4371>

This paper concerns the relationship between bears and humans among the Khanty people: in particular, what is meant by their claim that the bear is “half man, half animal, half god”. Within this focus, it introduces the Khanty concept of a ‘more-than-human’ society and examines the interconnections between its constituent parties. It explores the worldview in which the dividing lines between human and natural, and human and divine, are not as sharp as Cartesian logic would have them.

▪ **Keywords:** Siberia, Khanties, bears, neo-animism, perspectivism

Članek obravnava razmerje med medvedi in ljudmi, kakor je dojeno med sibirskim ljudstvom Hanti. Njihova oznaka, da je medved »pol človek, pol žival, pol bog« priča o konceptu »več kot človeške« družbe in usmerja pozornost na vzajemne povezave med njenimi konstitutivnimi deli. V tem pogledu na svet ločnice med človeškim in naravnim ter človeškim in božanskim niso tako ostre, kakor jih predstavlja kartezijanska logika.

▪ **Ključne besede:** Sibirija, Hanti, medvedi, novi animizem, perspektivizem

In the eye of the wild

In 2021, Nastassja Martin, a French anthropologist with interests in new animism and the relationship/boundaries between humans and animals, published her own life story under the title *In the Eye of the Wild*. While conducting fieldwork in Kamchatka, Martin had been attacked and nearly killed by a bear, which had all but shattered her skull and left her scarred for life. As she drifted from hospital to hospital, first in Russia, then in France, she tried to understand what had happened to her. Finally, she returned to Kamchatka to try and puzzle out what it meant to have become, as the local indigenous people put it, a *medka* – half human, half bear – as a result of the attack, or rather, of the infinitely close and intimate relationship it had created between them. Her book speaks of the traversibility of worlds – the state of existing between them – its heroine-narrator tottering in the balance between life and death, Russia and France, the human world and the animal one: “The bear and I speak of liminality, and even if this is terrifying, no one can change that” (Martin, 2021: 80). As time went on, the author increasingly adopted the “native view” that she should “gain knowledge of animals the indigenous way: should open herself to them as to her fellow humans, making their experiences her own” (Ingold, 2004). In the meantime, she experienced one of the foundational assertions of new animism: that there is never any sharp boundary between human and animal (Pedersen, 2001; Willerslev, 2007), human and god (Carrithers et al. 2010; Oehler, 2014), or even human and lake (Mészáros, 2016), glacier (Cruikshank, 2005),

or indeed, any other being or “more-than-human creature” (Ingold, 2004).¹ Thus, as she endeavoured to make sense of her own life, she gained increasing comprehension of that perspective from which the usual European dividing line between human and natural appears a dead end.²

Another to have claimed that Western Cartesian thought draws too sharp a division between cultural and natural, human and animal, is Rane Willerslev. In the Western mentality, he proposes, humans have exclusive claim to the constituent aspects of personality – e.g. intentions, moral awareness, and philosophical thought – while animals are natural beings whose actions are automatic, instinctive. The Yukaghir, by contrast, take a radically opposite view: there is no distinct dividing line between human and animal, other species are viewing things and seeing and thinking about the world just as humans do, though from a different angle or standpoint, depending on the momentary form they have taken (Willerslev, 2004). For Viveiros de Castro, this type of perspectivism turns Western uninaturalism and multiculturalism into uniculturalism and multinaturalism, as Western ontology rests upon the notion that nature is uniform and cultures diverse, while perspectivism holds out for a unity of intellect and spirit across a variety of corporeal forms (Viveiros de Castro, 1998: 470).

Martin’s book, which, with its peculiar language, not only slaloms back and forth between worlds, but also teeters between leisure and scientific literature, sets the reader thinking as to just how the relationships between humans, animals, and gods might be described in words that render comprehensible – even to the logical mind – these porous and in no way acute boundary lines, divisions that frequently bind rather than separate. How to understand a world where the boundaries between humans and animals are neither sharp nor impassable? One way to draw closer to a solution is to try to talk about the bear from the Khanty perspective, as we shall do here.

¹ “It’s always like that here; nothing ever turns out how you want, it resists. I think of all the times when the shot doesn’t fire, when the fish don’t bite, when the reindeer won’t go on, when the snowmobile misfires. It’s the same for everyone. We try to maintain some poise, but we trip, we sink deep, we hobble, we fall and pick ourselves up again. Ivan says that only humans think they do everything well. Only humans attach such importance to how other humans view them. Living in the forest is partly this: being a living thing among so many others, going up and down along with them.” (Martin, 2021: 106)

² “On that day, August 25, 2015, the event is not: a bear attacks a French anthropologist somewhere in the mountains of Kamchatka. The event is: a bear and a woman meet and the frontiers between two worlds implode. Not just the physical boundaries between the human and the animal, in whom the confrontation opens fault lines in their bodies and their minds. This is also when mythical time meets reality; past time joins the present moment; dream meets flesh. The scene unfolds in our time, but it could equally have happened a thousand years ago. It is just me and the bear in this contemporary world that’s indifferent to our tiny personal trajectories – but this is also the archetypal confrontation, the unsteady man with his erect sex standing face-to-face with the wounded bison in the Lascaux well. And as in the Lascaux well scene, the incredible event depicted is dominated by uncertainty about its outcome, although it is inevitable. But unlike the well scene, what happens to us next is no mystery, for neither of us dies, we both return from the impossibility that has happened.” (Martin, 2021: 101–102)

The field

I have been carrying on my field research along the Vasyugan³ in west Siberia in the Russian Federation for over twenty years, spending a total of nearly two years on location. Today, the area of the Vasyugan administratively belongs to the Kargasok district of Tomsk province. The centre is the Novy Vasyugan settlement and its outlying precinct, the Ozeroye colony without permanent inhabitants. When my fieldwork began, the male members of the Khanty families born there would go out to the camp to fish or hunt, practically the only occupation that brought the families some income. By now, the Khanty hunters having grown too old or died, only non-Khanty men married into the families go out hunting, usually to eke out the earnings from their permanent jobs. In the course of a few decades, the Khanty of Vasyugan dwindled from the overwhelming majority into an insignificant minority in the region, owing to the intense resettlement of people under Stalin's collectivization and anti-kulak program in the 1930s-1940s, the shifting of other masses accused of collective guilt affecting mainly Baltic and German people in the 1940s, and to migration motivated by the upswing of oil mining started in the late 1950s.

A diverse network of relations evolved between the Khanty and non-Khanty people – the latter called “Russian” in the colloquial language. This entailed a high degree of assimilation and the emergence of peculiar patterns of identity and ethnicity, the Khanty of Vasyugan being dissolved, as it were, among the incoming Russian and other non-Khanty settlers.⁴

During fieldwork I spent much time in the forest in the company of different hunters, taking note of their comments on spotting bears or their tracks; watching their behaviour when they sensed a bear somewhere near, and registering their innumerable bear-related activities. I heard, took part or initiated conversations about the bear all the time, and listened to endless series of stories about encounters with bears.

The language of my fieldwork and the conversations was Russian: along the Vasyugan practically all speak Russian, even the very few old Khanty who are able to communicate in Khanty, but the meeting of two Khanty equally fluent in Khanty communication would be quite extraordinary now along the Vasyugan.

The longer texts below are transcribed from recordings made during everyday chats, interviews, group interviews. Other occasions of telling such stories, however, clearly determine the possibility of collecting. In the woods, after skiing for tens of kilometres, in temperatures well below minus 40 degrees, there is no technique or fieldworker who could record stories narrated while drinking tea. The researcher has to resort to taking

³ The Vasyugan is a left-side affluent of the Ob about one thousand kilometers south of the mouth of the Irtysh.

⁴ Jordan (2003: 46) acknowledges that the most massive Russian influence affected the Khanty along the Vasyugan in addition to the areas of the Ob and the Salim.

written notes. I conversed about the bear with nearly a hundred people. I recorded all the italicized quotations personally, so I do not annotate them separately.

Research literature on the Obi-Ugrians ascribes a salient role to the bear, and the writings on the bear stress the sacral aspects of this beast. The sacrality of the bear is one of the most frequent themes of discussions on the Khanty (and the closely related Mansi),⁵ quite obviously as the bear is a focal point of Khanty religion, a key symbol that organizes the whole of the Khanty religious mentality. There is less literature on the everyday life of bears and hunting, and mostly its technological, less frequently its legal aspects are considered (e.g. Sirelius, 1914; Kulemzin, Lukina, 1977; Adayev, 2007: 44–46). Moreover, hunting stories are rarely narrated in Khanty folklore publications (e.g. Munkácsi, 1892–1921; Kulemzin, Lukina, 1978) but occasionally crop up in linguistic compendia (Honti, 1986). The relationship, similarities and differences between bears and humans in this lore have not been discussed until now, to my knowledge.

Bears and humans

In their interpretation, the bear is the protector of honour on Earth. As for his origins, he is the son of Torem, with whom he once lived in the unattainable heights. From there he was cast out for the vice of conceit, plunging naked to the earth, where he landed between two trees. In this position he lay for such a long time that he became overgrown with moss. He then begged Torem to free him from his straitened circumstances and give him a life of liberty, but not to deprive him of his high origins. The god told him: “I will give you life – let you become a bear! Men will fear you and will swear upon you, this shall be your heavenly gift; but they will also hunt you and will bury you with great honour.” Then the moss became fur. But the bear did not lose his divinity in its entirety, nor has he to this day: he still sees and hears everything, even in death. (Dunin-Gorkavich, 1996: 37)

Here, Aleksandr Dunin-Gorkavich recounts the story he has heard of the bear’s origin, a tale that reveals the most important aspects of the Khanty’s relationship to the animal. What important motifs can be extracted from the story? First, that the bear is a being of celestial provenance, the son of a god that, having created the world, retreats

⁵ To pick but the most important titles from the extensive literature: Gondatti, 1888; Karjalainen, 1927; Munkácsi, Kálmán, 1963; Sokolova, 1972; Csernyecov, 1977; Kannisto, 1977; Bakró-Nagy, 1979; Kulemzin, 1984; Schmidt, 1989, 1990; Lukina, 1990a; Golovnev, 1995; Mandelstam Balzer, 1999; Moldanov, 1999; Moldanov, Moldanova, 2000; Jordan, 2003. For a brief review of the investigations see Nagy, 2008: 106–109.

into inactivity (a *deus otiosus*). Though the son is cast out of heaven for reason of his transgressions, the god bestows upon him a new opportunity: to continue life as a bear. He must therefore change into an animal, meaning primarily that the moss that covers his naked body will become fur. Despite this transformation, the beast retains its divine ability to see and hear all: its omniscience. As a result, humans respect and fear the bear, though they still hunt it. In other words, the bear possesses godly, human, and animal traits simultaneously and indeed, most frequently all three at once: “the bear is half animal, half human, and half god,” (Mandelstam Balzer, 1999: 190).

In his travels, Dunin-Gorkavich covered much of the former Tobolsk Governorate, but did not visit the valley of the Vasyugan, then part of the Tomsk Governorate and home to the Khanty among whom I would conduct my own fieldwork approximately a century later. Still, it is no error to quote his writings in introduction to my own, as the conclusions that emerge from his story in essence coincide with the Vasyugan Khanty’s own views.

The body and characteristics of the bear

When analysing the relationship between bear and human, the first thing we must realise is that, by the Khanty, bears are held to be extraordinarily similar to humans. This similarity manifests in both their physical and psychological traits, as well as in behaviour, temperament, and habits. Given the constraints on the length of this study, for the present, I will have leeway to flesh out only this single aspect of the question, I cannot discuss in detail the relationship between the bear and the gods.

The people of the Vasyugan see the resemblance between humans and bears as extending to outward appearance as well: both have roughly the same height when standing erect, for example, and possess similar internal organs. “*Bears are just like us, only with claws: if you remove their skins, they are more or less the same.*” One tale makes the claim that they are like people, only smarter and stronger. Another that is frequently told has to do with a pathologist who was charged with dissecting a corpse found on the outskirts of the village, and who noticed only after quite some time had passed that the body was actually that of a bear, not a human. In this case, it is clearly not the veracity of the story (or lack of it) that matters, but that to the locals, it was indisputable fact.

Beyond morphology, the bear’s behaviour, too, cleaves closely to that of humans. For one thing, bears know how to medicate themselves, rubbing fir resin on cuts, eating red willow bark to cure the hangover-like headaches they get following hibernation in spring, chewing a fungus that grows on Swiss pine to alleviate stomach ache, and eating fly agaric as a courage-enhancing drug during rutting season. Additionally, bears mark their living quarters, i.e. their caves, by breaking the branches around their entrances.

Only before hibernating for the winter do they erase the signs to keep themselves safe from hunters. They also mark their hunting grounds in a manner similar to the way humans mark forest paths, with claw marks in place of human hatchet marks on trees. Bears suck their thumbs, cry, and when ransacking a house and finding vodka there, drink themselves into oblivion, waking up the next day with a human-like hangover. A bear will sometimes even climb to the top of a high fir tree out of mere curiosity, or chew on a Swiss pine cone like their human counterparts: *“They eat Swiss pine like we do. They’ll gather up a few, sit down, and eat them. Not the cones themselves, but the pine nuts inside.”* Inside the bear’s den it makes a regular bed – just as man – kneading a pillow out of moss. I know of a Vasyugan man who, having been trapped in the forest slept in a bear’s cave in summer, when the bear no longer visits its den, and it was more comfortable than any covert he could have made out of twigs.

Bears cry when they are sad, hum to themselves when happy and, as the following story shows, love music:

There was another bear there at the time, one that was a bit smaller – a smaller one. Every evening, people would play the guitar and sing – here, in our area, by the house where the oil well was. Everything around was all beaten down. In the woods, too, it was all well-trodden. At first I didn’t know what it was. It was traipsing all over here and there, scampering around them where their house was, there at the old health station. And I said: Yuri Fyodorovich, there’s a bear churning around out there. Then I saw it, it was walking about, eating raspberries. Just eating raspberries, visiting them every evening. As they played the guitar and sang, it was crawling all over – found it interesting. It went over there, had an ear out and all. Even there, where my grain crib is, it sat around, listening to the music – held its interest, too, it did. Just sat there, all eyes and ears. Listening.

But it not only likes to listen to music, it makes music itself:

– *We were gathering Swiss pine cones on the Tuḫ Siye,⁶ where we had a little hut, too. Have you been there? Haven’t you seen the hut?*

– *I have and I’ve seen it, but it’s since rotted to pieces.*

– *Yeah, yeah, we used to live there, right on the bank. We’d gone quite far, collecting cones. We were bringing them back to the hut, which was a bit closer. The house was here, on the bank, and we were gathering cones. There was a big fire pile there. And as we came up: “come on,*

⁶ A river that springs from the lake near Ozernoye.

let's look for those sheets!" Iron sheets, simple iron sheets. They'd covered something with them, covered something up, when they sifted or baked the cones. Dried them. Anyway, we went looking for them: 'where can our metal sheets be?' But there ... the bear, as he comes in, turns them over, and with that they begin to clank. The bear liked that. Was listening to the music. He pushed them about, and as they flew off, they kept clanking. He kept playing that way, entertaining himself. We hardly found them again, those sheets. There were four of them, nice big ones. Anyway, that's how the bear made a mess of the place.

Yet another parallel between humans and bears in the Khanty conception has to do with their habits – some of them not necessarily good ones. Bears, like people, can be either good or evil, a judgement the Khanty observer reaches fundamentally on the basis of how they relate to humans: the good ones avoid people, disturbing neither them nor their hunting shacks or larders; bears that steal stored up food, on the other hand, are regarded as gluttonous and mischievous; those that cause serious damage or are even aggressive are clearly bad or evil. Like their human counterparts, bears are willing to forgive, but can also carry grudges, and will punish those who provoke their ire.

The many similarities notwithstanding, bears are seen as more perfect than humans in certain regards: they are *"just like us, but faster, stronger, and more intelligent"*.



Figure 1. A rowanberry tree broken in half by a bear. Photograph by the author.



Figures 2 and 3. Markings on trees: The marks of a bear's claws as compared to the marks made by a hunter's hatchet. Photographs by the author.



To the Khanty, the bear's strength, readable in the numerous signs left in fallen or broken trees, is beyond dispute. It sometimes occurs that a bear leaves unambiguous proof of its greatly superior strength, as in the case of the hunters who, with the help of their dogs, disturbed a bear that had just downed an elk. The bear dropped its prey in the water, where it sunk. No matter how hard the hunters tried, they could not pull it back out, even with a rope. The next day, all that was left of the creature were its bones on the shore. The bear had retrieved it: *"He showed us. 'You couldn't pull it out, but I sure could! See?'"*

One cannot run from a bear, because the bear is faster; one cannot escape a bear in water, because the bear swims faster than a human can row; and one cannot get away from a bear by climbing, as bears are much better at that than people. Though bears understand human speech, the reverse is not true. This clear hierarchy is levelled only by human weapons: to meet a bear without one is irresponsible; with weapon in hand, a human at least has an equal chance, possibly better. As the Khanty say: *"With a shotgun, one might just possibly pick a fight with a bear."* It is perhaps no coincidence that in the narratives of the northern groups of Khanty, when a hero turns into a bear, he chews up his weaponry and armour, then spits on himself, at which his weapons become teeth and claws, and his armour a furry pelt.

The man-bear relationship – precisely because of the undisputed hierarchy between them – is in a delicate balance sustained by both the bear and man basically shunning an encounter. The realm of the bear and that of the humans in fact appear as parallel worlds. They coexist, use the same trails, hunt and gather the same produce. Their worlds permanently intersect, the bear's time of day being mainly the night, that of the man being the day. Walking the hunting paths, hunters inspect the tracks of the bear crossing man's trail again and again, and the next day they check to realize that the bear has similarly inspected the traces of man. Local people believe that there are two masters of the forest: people and bears, but they put the bear ahead of people, claiming that a bear could attack them any time and kill them, but it doesn't usually do so. In the final analysis, the real lord of the forest – to the mind of the local people – is the bear. Both keep tabs on the other, but they shun face-to-face encounters: *"We may traverse each other's hunting grounds, but I don't go up to its signs so there would be two hunters at one place. It is the lord of the forest, we are only its guests. How shall I put it, our race is its rival. We are not welcome guests in each other's hunting field."*

The bear-man relationship is fundamentally determined by respect: man respects the bear, and he thinks the bear respects him as well; the basic ideology of this coexistence is *"I let it go along its path and it lets me go along mine"*. The latter sentence is very often uttered when the conversation is about the coexistence of man and bear, even in cases when the two did meet but parted in peace.

As evidenced above, the power relations must be preserved in the forest, a neutral relationship based on respect is to be maintained. This also implies that people

should not behave as its rivals, should not compete with the bear. When a hunter finds a scratching on a tree which the bear demarcated its hunting ground with, and also indicates its height, he should not provoke the bear. Some opine that if man and bear should begin to compete, and the bear sees that man reaches higher, it will leave its former hunting field, in acknowledgement of the superiority of the other party, but the hunter who triggered this competition must also observe the primacy of the bear if it wins: he must not shoot it and has to shun that part of the forest.⁷ This solution is, however, mainly seen as a fundamental mistake and stories are listed to prove that the bear takes such provocation for a challenge, and does take revenge on the hunter.⁸

There are myriad explanations for the bear's – mentioned above – intelligence in Khanty folklore, to which many of its habits are attributed. Its success as a hunter, for example, is ascribed to intelligence, as is its ability to sense when the first snow will fall so that it can lie down to hibernate, generally on the day prior. Bears will similarly sense the approach of a hunter (*"It knew they were coming, saw it in advance; it can see what will happen the day before in its dreams"*). Also attributed to intelligence is the bear's habit of avoiding jars when raiding a hunting lodge in favour of food in bags and cans, which cannot cut it. The bear's mental faculties are frequently seen as supernatural, particularly when being chased. A bear on the run will muddle its tracks in order to mislead its pursuers, or will simply *"conceal its tracks and scent"* to fool the dogs.

The close relationship between bears and humans is also reflected in the fact that, like humans, bears evaluate danger according to the categories of "own" and "stranger": local red bears are calculating, alien black bears that come from other regions are aggressive and dangerous: *"Our brown bear would rather evade us, but this black one is aggressive, it would even attack technical equipment."*⁹

Close relationship between the human and bear societies is also indicated by the fact that there are no major rites of passage among the Vasyugan Khanties, but no man

⁷ A similar story was recorded as a tale along the Vasyugan by N. V. Lukina (Kulemzin, Lukina, 1978: 154).

⁸ *"The bear marks its territory, leaving scratches on trees. It marks its territory and makes regular rounds. The hunter who owns the area found this little path, he went along making his own marks, scratching the trees, often above the bear's marks. The bear then went and put its marks higher. The hunter notched the tree even higher. Four or five times, perhaps, they took turns, but then it lay in wait and it killed the hunter. - Does that mean they became rivals?"*

- Yes, you see, its territory ... it had made it quite clear that it was its territory. And the hunter put his notches even higher, still. He shouldn't have done such a thing. If you put them below its marks, there's no problem, the bear won't harm you. But you see, he put them above the bear's signs, challenging it."

⁹ Though zoologists regard the brown bear as a unified species, local people differentiate three kinds. The smallest is the "ant-eater bear" (Russian: *муравейник*, Khanty: *kotji ix*, both words derived from the word for 'ant'), which usually digs up anthills and eats ants, its neck is often white. The red bear (Russian: *красно-бурый* 'reddish brown', Khanty: *wörtepunow ix* 'red-haired bear') got its name for its color, it weighs about 200 kg; the black bear (Russian: *чёрно-бурый* 'blackish brown', Khanty: *põhte punow ix* 'black-haired bear') which is wholly black is the largest (up to 300–500 kg) and the most aggressive. Black bears are said to have come from the Altay region, while the ant-eater bears grow into red bears when they get old.

is regarded as a fully initiated hunter until he has killed a bear or at least a reindeer. References to hunting as symbols dominated the rites of passage of Khanty males before the mass influx of Russians: at birth, the placenta was hung up with a miniature bow and arrow at a sacral place; the appearance of bow or arrow in a dream predicted the birth of a boy; a young man was initiated into adulthood when he had killed its first big game (bear, reindeer); in death symbolism it also had a great role: those had to be regarded as dead who were no longer able to hunt, to catch anything, and the weaponry – including the bow and arrow – was compulsory grave accessory.

The soul of the bear

To begin with, Khanty believe that bears have identical personalities to those of humans, as well as both a “life-force soul” (*ilt, lil*), and a “shadow soul” (*iles, kurr*), just as humans and other animals do. Because the shadow soul is so closely bound to the human form, it is no coincidence that the souls of bears, who resemble humans so closely, are also extraordinarily human-like (cf. Kulemzin, 1984: 155–156; Adayev, 2007: 166–167). This belief in the bear’s human or human-like soul is held by the Vasyugan Khanty expressly, to the extent that to them, the bear even has the faculty of thought, which they ascribe to the workings of another soul, called the *ñomes*. Only three other animals besides humans and bears have this ability, namely elk, beavers, and swans.

There is therefore an elemental similarity postulated between bear and man, based fundamentally on the similarity of the souls constituting their personalities. Tim Ingold posits (Ingold, 1986: 247) that animals do not have personalities, but their owners who represent all the specimens of a species do, because in the stories they are not personified or addressed by personal names.¹⁰ Disagreeing with this statement, Willerslev, whom I agree with, claims that an animal species can also have personality which it does not receive from the owner spirit but possesses it in its own right. In the Vasyugan area research can only find very vague and indirect hints to the owner of the bears, whereas each bear is described as a specific personality with its particular character. As mentioned above, some bears are benevolent, some are ill-willing, and others are unpredictable. Willerslev (Willerslev, 2004) and those who agree with him¹¹ argue on this basis that owing to the identity of souls, other species look at and see things and think about the world like people do, with the reservation that their optic angle and viewpoint changes depending on the form they inhabit.

¹⁰ For the ‘owner of animals’ concept, see: Hultkrantz, 1961, 1965; Kulemzin, 1984; Lot-Falc, 1953; Munkácsi, 1892–1921; Paulson, 1961, 1968.

¹¹ Cf. also: Pedersen, 2001, for the Khanty’s views on animate and inanimate things, see Jordan, 2003: 102–106.

This correspondence of souls is the reason that bears understand human speech – even hear and understand human thought. It is also the reason a bear will show himself to a human who concentrates on the possibility of their meeting:

– *Have I told you about the time I first saw a bear while duck hunting?*

– Yes.¹²

– *I was hunting ducks. The ducks – ducklings – were already half-grown. You could shoot twenty or thirty of them at a time. Come evening, I'd take them home and my mother'd prepare them. Sometimes she made soup, sometimes pierogi. My father had told me that if you met a bear and didn't have your rifle, and it attacked you, you should curse, berate it, everything like that. Of course, I didn't have my rifle, just a shotgun. Usually I took six or seven bullets with me, but this time I'd taken them out, put cartridges in their place so I could shoot that many more ducks. Before I used to have a dog, too, a young male, but at that time, during the war, I didn't. He wasn't with me. Miron's¹³ wife brought some dog – tied it up, brought it from Vasyugan and gave it to me so I could take it with me. That dog was good at flushing out ducks. I thought a bear would come. That was what I had thought that morning – those were the kinds of thoughts I had running about my head. If it went on its hind legs, would it hold its nose in the air? Would its arms hang at its sides? That's what I was thinking about. I thought that would be interesting to see – something I'd be glad to see. That's what I was thinking – as I walked, that's what I was going over in my head. Up to that point I didn't see the bear, though it had already showed signs of itself.*

– How old were you?

– *Oh, about twelve. At the time. Okay, so. I went to hunt ducks, and by that time, some of them were already of flying age. They were nice and big.*

– Toward the end of August.

– *Right, toward the end of August. Every year I shot a lot of them, sometimes twenty-five, sometimes thirty. It was the end of August. Or maybe closer to the middle – the middle of August.*

– The middle of August, when half of them can fly and the other half can't.

– *We'd had a duck blind down there on the river Tux Siye. One day I was walking along like this and I thought: 'fuck, how is this possible?' I*

¹² Here, the storyteller posed the question to me then told the story to a friend.

¹³ The storyteller's paternal uncle.

had tossed the bullets out of my pack – for ducks it would be fine. I went toward the hayfield, in the rowboat, and I looked – aha – he’s sitting. He was red, and also black – he had a black stripe on his leg: it was later that I saw him that well. He was sitting there, and I said to myself, ‘crap, here he is – he’s going to charge me’. He was on the bank of the stream, and I said to myself, ‘damn, he’s going to chew me up’. And of course I didn’t have my bullets with me. ‘Come on,’ I started to slow myself with my oars. The dog was looking at him. ‘Come on,’ I swore, shouted at him, ‘alright now,’ but he just sits there. Then he stood up, stood there, I was shouting, but he just stood. There were about twenty-five metres between us, maybe a bit more. ‘Well, fuck,’ I thought, ‘he’s not leaving’. I swore, screamed, shouted. And all of a sudden, boom, he was on all fours and took off into the bushes. He’d only have needed three or four jumps to get me, but he chose the brush. I let the dog out on the other side, thinking he’d get away, but instead he crossed the stream and where the bear had disappeared, so did the dog. Gone – he was nowhere, nowhere at all. Then he was back. ‘Aha,’ I thought, but then he left once more. The dog went after him, for four or five minutes in the brush. ‘Okay,’ I thought, ‘he’s gone. To hell with them.’ I went on with the boat on the far side, but as I did, I kept looking back at the side where the bear went. ‘Damn,’ I thought, ‘he’ll come after me yet’. Finally I went home and told everyone that it was like this and that with the bear. Then I made myself stop. I didn’t think about him in the woods anymore. ‘Okay,’ I thought. This morning I was puzzling about the way he walked – like a man, nose in the air or whatever. That’s what I was thinking about. I’d never seen it before. Anyway.

A bear can also hear what is said in its absence and by the same token, can hear what is said about it beside its carcass at bear festivals. This is one of the reasons it demands that people behave respectfully even when it is not there, which among the Khanty includes refraining from frivolous mention of its name: though in the Vasyugan region, the word for ‘bear’ is *ix*, in general, the taboo name *kakə wajaχ* ‘brother animal’ is used instead.

Bears will not only hear what is said of them, however, but even foresee or dream in advance of a human’s approach:

– There was a cottonwood tree there that had fallen. It was behind it that [the bear] had been lying, across from the road, watching. [He looked] like this with his head. [He looked] back, [surveyed] his own tracks. He felt [our presence], probably. It was just a day before that he’d passed there.



Figure 4. To illustrate his story, my conversation partner drew this picture of the bear, showing how it held its paws and nose while standing on two legs. Piotr Mihailovich Milimov's drawing from the author's field notes.

- Aha.
- *He must have seen us in a dream. He can do that. His mind is as clever as a human's.*
- He saw you in a dream?
- *Right. He must have seen us in a dream. He felt [our presence]. That's why the beast¹⁴ left. Just a day before us.*

That the personalities of bear and human are fundamentally identical, hardly differing from one another intellectually or spiritually, is what gives the bear its power of transformation. The Vasyugan Valley is one of multiple regions where stories suggest that people, upon death or other circumstances, can turn into bears:

According to the stories of the elders, the bear came into this world via transformation from human flesh. This change from man to bear transpired under the following circumstances:

Once there was a hero, who in his life was extremely fond of walking the woods. He went there often, and always returned home again. Once, he went into the forest for meat, as was his wont, and got lost: so far did he go and to such a place that there was simply no way of return, whether forward or back. One possibility of escaping the impenetrable woods did present itself, however: to climb over an enormous stump covered in moss. Yet in the clothing he was wearing, every attempt was unsuccessful, so he did the only thing he could: he took it off, outer garments and undergarments, for the sake of reaching the other side. Placing them next to the stump, the hero climbed over, stark naked.

As he did so, at that same moment, he felt something heavy upon his body. He checked himself over and noticed that he was covered in fur, the same that we now see upon the bear. Seeing himself so, the hero was frightened and quickly turned about to try and reach his clothing, so that he might make his body smooth again and the fur invisible. When he climbed back, however, and began looking for the place where his clothes had been placed, he could not find them anywhere: neither where he had let it fall, nor anywhere else. In the explanation of the Ostyaks, the hero's garments had been carried away by a spirit, and were transformed into the fur on his body as he passed over the stump. In this way the man, by the spirit's cunning and intervention, became a bear. Because the hero had no human clothing and his body was covered in fur, he did not dare walk among other men. He remained alone in the woods for

¹⁴ The bear.

all his days, wandering and eating whatever he found. And so it was that the bear came to the earth according to the beliefs of the Ostyaks. (Lukina, 1990b: 79–80)

A typical idea in the transformation stories is that of a man trapped in the forest, adapting to the life there by becoming a bear. On the one hand, this refers back to what we have already discussed, that the bear is in some aspects more than man, but it also reflects the closeness that links it to man. The most direct example of these stories is when a man trapped in the forest marries a bear and has offspring. However, the resulting children are doomed to be outcasts in human society.

The godlike qualities of the bear

That the Khanty view the bear as unequivocally more powerful than they are can be attributed to their ideology regarding the animal's similarity to the gods, any differences being merely social, rather than ontological. In Khanty mythology, the bear is sometimes described as the son of the Father of Heaven. Other stories say that various gods, too, may take bear form. At other times they say the animal is itself invested with supernatural abilities, as its origin myths suggest.¹⁵

What we have described above as the bear's cleverness is in fact also a divine quality to the Khanty, features that would previously have been interpreted as clearly supernatural.

Both the bear-human correspondence, and the supernatural powers ascribed to the bear specifically, are expressed in the Khanty custom of addressing the animal by alternate names. It has already been mentioned that even today, Khanty-speaking hunters refer to bears using the descriptive "taboo" name, "brother animal". Even in Russian, the clear *lingua franca* of the Vasyugan Valley, bears are not necessarily named as such, the preferred reference being the third person singular without qualification. Other possibilities include the concise "wild animal" (Russian *зверь*), or, not uncommonly, "Mishka" or "Uncle Ványa" (Russian *Дядя Ваня*). As to how much the Russian word usage of elderly Khanty is, generally speaking, influenced by their understanding of the foreign-language designation as a taboo word, I cannot judge.

One interesting aspect of the Khanty attitude toward the bear is the seeming tension between the indisputable existence of bear-hunting, the consumption of bear meat, and the use of bear grease and bile as medicines in the region and the normative proscription of harming bears on the basis of their divinity. This inconsonance is, however, merely

¹⁵ On the bear's relationship to the sacred and the various ways in which bears are conceived see Schmidt, 1990.

illusory: the culture in fact legitimises the option of hunting in multiple ways and from many different fundamental stances. Although the bear is a sacred animal, it was nevertheless created for them, as suggested, among other things, by the Dunin-Gorkavich story. Also, though bears supervise the human world and punish its inhabitants for their sins, making bear society a super-society with respect to humanity; at the same time, human society is a super-society with respect to bears: if a bear commits a transgression against the rules imposed by its progenitor, the Father of Heaven, then humans have the right to kill it – and indeed, must do so. The basis for this according to an alternate origin story is that the Father of Heaven ordained his son should live peacefully, attacking only those who sinned against or behaved disrespectfully toward him. But his bear-son soon violated this prescription, either because he could not resist the temptation to raid larders, or because, hungry, he plundered human graves, thus investing humankind with the right to hunt him. As a result, from that time forward, whenever a hunter saw a bear – that is, when a bear showed itself of its own free will – it meant that it was ready to die. Naturally, such occurrences were regarded as a privilege and an honour, and if the hunter upon which the opportunity was conferred then failed to kill the bear in question, he would have to atone for the failure by being ripped apart by the bear himself (Mandelstam Balzer, 1999: 190).

In the same way, the Yugan Khanty, too, hold that to kill a bear is a necessity where its signs have been spotted or its cave discovered. This does not, however, necessarily mean that the discoverer himself must dispatch the bear: he may sell the right to another hunter, though the fact of the transaction may not by any means be kept secret. In the early winter of 1998, I myself witnessed the discovery of a bear's cave by a Yugan Khanty man who, having never hunted bears before, was terrified of the prospect and decided to sell the opportunity to another. This was better for everyone, in his opinion: for him because a local entrepreneur paid him a motorised saw for the information; for the bear (and the social order) because it was able to meet its end, as desired. If he had kept the occurrence a secret, it would not have gone well for him; either he would have had to suffer being torn apart by a bear or would never again have had the opportunity of finding a bear cave.

In the strongly acculturated Vasyugan region, on the other hand, such beliefs and rules are no longer upheld. There, a meeting with a bear need not be followed by a hunt, except in the singular case where the bear's death is deemed absolutely necessary: *"Once you set out to hunt a bear in winter, you have to finish what you started, because if he wakes up and doesn't return to his sleep, you may have a shatun¹⁶ bear on your hands."* It may therefore happen that a hunter fails to shoot a bear he has spotted, or that bears are hunted that have not "shown themselves" in advance. It may

¹⁶ A *shatun* bear, or "winter walker," is a bear that fails to hibernate in winter and is therefore particularly dangerous to humans.

even happen that a bear is hunted by snare. A loop of strong wire is set up in a path a bear is expected to take, and the other end attached to a strong tree or birch stump of about one metre's height. As the ensnared bear tries to free itself from the loop, it tightens so that the creature slowly suffocates itself. Most often, however, the hunters tie the snare to a tree, then retreat into an area home or hunting lodge to wait. Upon hearing the bear's far-reaching cries, they then return to the spot to shoot the animal in the midst of its death throes.

Thus, the bear's supernatural abilities justify its status as a power that punishes or protects. Although the population of the Vasyugan Valley no longer remembers the above-cited custom of the "bear oath" described in detail by Dunin-Gorkavich (Munkácsi, 1891), the animals are still thought of as deliverers of supernatural punishment there. For this reason, when once a woman disappeared without a trace, having "doubtlessly been torn to pieces by a bear", many attributed the matter either to supernatural punishment or to a foreseeable fulfilment of fate. The most frequent explanation for the story was that she had returned to her homeland specifically to die: that at the time she had entered the woods to put her family's graves in order, she was clearly preparing for her own passing; after all, she hardly took any food with her, nor were her clothes adequate for the task. Another interpretation was that her death had been punishment, as in the course of dealing with her parents' graves she had dismantled and scattered an



Figure 5. A bear snare. Photograph by the author.

enormous anthill, a grievous sin to be sure. There did, however, arise a third explanation: that her boyfriend's wife, who had been dead for years, could not permit the man to find love again, and it had in fact been *she* who had caused the woman's disappearance.

Illustrative of the bear's protective role is the state of my host's Ozernoye home attic, where, in accordance with the former Khanty custom, I found a number of bear skulls had been preserved. Though he was the only one who still did so, even those of non-Khanty descent would consistently tell me that it was the skulls' presence that had protected his home from bear attacks: *"How many times have bears upturned everything at the hunting lodge, the streetside oven, the barn!? But the house, it never touches!"*

What we have described above as the bear's cleverness is in fact also a divine quality, traits that would once have been interpreted as clearly supernatural.

Lastly

Everything we have talked about so far concerns the fact that there is no sharp distinction between humans and animals in the Khanty mythology. The bear is a being "that defies categorisation according to clear structures" (Mandelstam Balzer, 1999: 68). This is already implied by its name: *kakə wajaχ*, meaning 'brother-animal'. The bear is an animal because it is referred to in the group of animals, because it can be hunted and eaten – with certain limitations – on account of being similar to other animals. At the same time, its closeness to man is unquestionable to the Khanty, since it is spoken of in terms of kinship, which also links it to human society.

The Khanty believe bears and humans are similar in their bodies, but more importantly, that the physical similarities can be explained by their souls. It is because of this that the boundaries between bear and human can be crossed, that man can transform into bear, that their origin stories are inseparable. These texts are not about distance, but about proximity: suddenly something takes on a different form, man becomes bear, which is almost a surprise to those who have been watching and telling the story. This would be unthinkable without the essential similarity between them.

In the stories, bears think in the same way as humans, they have the same good and bad manners: that is, as Willerslev argues, they are not irrational, and especially not simply instinctive (Willerslev, 2004), nor, I am convinced, are they without morals. According to the Khanty, the bear is conscious, as it plans how to capture its prey, cunningly traps it, chooses its bedding, and selects the best time to lie down. But the bear also has a moral sense, for it does good and bad deeds, is aware of the difference between the two, having been told by its father, the Father of Heaven; and endures the consequences of these. This binds it still more closely to man, for man is punished for his moral transgressions by the bear, who in turn obtains its penance at the hands of man. Morally they are each other's supersociety, overseers. So, in the Khanty perspective,

both man and bear live their lives as a series of rational and moral decisions in a jointly owned, mutually shared world.

The human and the bear are members of the same “more-than-human” society, one that shares worlds, lives, and thoughts, even where encounters are rare and, in fact, mutually avoided. The relationship is accompanied and regulated by emotional states such as admiration, even terror.

Bears are like people, sometimes greater, sometimes lesser; are supervisors and supervised; hunters and hunted. What really differentiates them, for all their external similarities, is the body: the hairy body, which is the defining moment of the bear’s transformation. The other difference is the loss of speech: the bear can understand human language, but it can no longer respond in a way that humans can understand. And there is one more thing that strongly separates them: the bear’s divine abilities, or, as the Khanty say its divine wisdom, which makes it overwhelmingly more powerful than man. It is the physical difference that makes it huntable by the Khanty, yet the divine qualities that are the source of respect and fear.

Both similarity and difference are evident, and both are necessary for the world to function ideally. As we have pointed out, the mixing of the two worlds poses a problem of categorisation: in the stories, the common children of bear and man are outcasts. As in Martin’s book cited at the beginning of my study, the point of the book is to confront the transgression of boundaries and its consequences. Indeed, by understanding it – putting it into words – we learn much more than merely how the Khanty think about animals; in fact, we learn about ourselves, and about the human place in a “more-than-human” society. What we gain and experience is a mode of thinking that opens up new perspectives in the management of relations between humankind and nature, one of the greatest challenges we face today – and one to which Western thinking has, to date, failed to provide an adequate response.

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Medvedi in ljudje

Izhodišče razprave je nedavno izdana knjiga Nastassje Martin (*In the Eye of the Wild*, 2021, slovenski prevod *Verjeti v zveri*, 2023), v kateri skuša avtorica razumeti razmerja med človeško in živalsko družbo, potem ko je doživela napad medveda nase. Govori o prepustnosti svetov, o medsvetovnosti svetov, zabrisovanju ločnic. Zelo dramatična knjiga skuša odgovoriti na vprašanje, kako bi lahko razmerja med ljudmi, živalmi in bogovi opisali z besedami, ki bi omogočile razumeti luknjičave in nikakor ostre meje, delitve, ki večinoma bolj povezujejo kakor ločujejo. Odgovore na podobna vprašanja skušam najti – pri tem pa ostajam v pojmovnem okviru znanstvenega jezika – v odnosu sibirskega ljudstva, danes zelo akulturiranih vasjuških Hantov, do medveda.

Medved se po prepričanju Hantov spremeni iz boga ali človeka v žival in ima tako živalske, človeške in božanske lastnosti: »medved je pol žival, pol človek in pol bog«, bitje, ki »se upira razvrstitvi po jasnih strukturah«.

Podobnosti se kažejo v fizičnih in psihičnih lastnostih kot tudi v vedenju, temperamentu. Medved je videti zelo podoben človeku, tako zelo, da se zdita skoraj nerazločljiva. Povezujejo ju tudi dobre in slabe navade. Toda medvedi na neki način veljajo za popolnejše od ljudi: so kot ljudje, le da so hitrejši, močnejši in inteligentnejši. Zato je razmerje med človekom in medvedom najboljše označeno s sožitjem: človek in medved sta člana iste »več kot človeške« družbe, ki si deli svetove, življenja in misli, tudi kjer so srečanja redka in se pravzaprav

vzajemno izogibata. Odnos spremljajo in uravnavajo čustvena stanja, kot sta občudovanje ali celo strah.

Medved je tudi po duhu zelo podoben človeku, ima enako osebnost kot ljudje. Hanti verjamejo, da sta oba, medved in človek, zavestni in moralni bitji ter drug drugega moralno nadzirata in kaznujeta. Zaradi tega je tudi mogoč prestop ločnic med njima, človek se lahko spremeni v medveda, njunih zgodb o izviri ni mogoče ločiti. Besedila ne govorijo o razdalji, marveč o bližini.

Kar ju ob vsej zunanji podobnosti resnično razločuje, je telo, dlakavo telo, izguba govora in medvedove božanske sposobnosti oziroma, kakor pravijo, njegova božanska modrost, zaradi katere je vedno močnejši od človeka. Zaradi telesne drugačnosti jih Hanti lahko lovijo, božanske lastnosti so vir spoštovanja in strahu.

Z razumevanjem ubesedenega hantskega stališča o razmerju med človekom in medvedom zvemo veliko več kot zgolj to, kako Hanti razmišljajo o živalih: pravzaprav se učimo o sebi in o mestu človeka v družbi. Pridobimo in doživimo način razmišljanja, ki odpira nove perspektive pri urejanju razmerij med človeštvom in naravo, enim največjih izzivov, s katerimi se danes spoprijemamo in na katerega zahodno razmišljanje do danes ni zmoglo ustrezno odgovoriti.