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A Relative in Bearskin: The Bear in Lower Amur Folk Beliefs

The study examines certain aspects of the bear cult practiced by the Lower Amur peoples. Using myths and rituals of Nivkhs, Ulchi, and Nanai people, a human-animal interface is reconstructed in the context of the Amur hunter-gatherer worldview. Reference is made to the concept of personification and situational identity, offering an approach to the beast image in ritual from the standpoint of perceiving it as a human capable of shapeshifting. With this approach we were able to explore the anthropomorphic aspect of the bear image in traditional beliefs. The comparative analysis of the bear cults of Eurasia and North America suggests that the mythical carnivore is not the same as that hunted by humans. Rather, oblique terms used with reference to the bear show that it was perceived as a personified ancestor, relative, member of a different world, one from which the welfare of each human being depends. Such a status agrees with the Amur natives' belief that the bear personifies the "taiga/mountain man" visiting his "earthly kin" to help them solve their problems and fulfill their wishes. Ceremonial butchering symbolized the beast's transformation: the animal was supposed to cast off its fur to put it on again after returning to its kin. The Amur bear feast, as the analysis shows, carried yet another, social message. Ceremonies of the bear cult were performed to conclude marital, clan, and trade treaties. In the 20th century, changes in the life of the Lower Amur peoples, relating to literacy, consumers' ethics, and a more rational worldview, caused the decline of the bear's ritual and social role.

Keywords: **Lower Amur, peoples, bear, folk beliefs, ritual, myth, kin.**

Introduction

Bear as patron of the elements, guardian spirit of people and animals, personified retribution or punishing power, etc. is one of the most important images in the worldview of most peoples of the Northern Hemisphere. It functions not only as a spiritual entity acting in the earthly realm, but also as a deity associated with the cycle of death, rebirth, and revival of the human race and nature (Eliade, 1958). Bear remains discovered in Eurasia, especially at human burial grounds, can be considered the evidence of its perception as inhabitant of other world. These finds date back to different periods from the Neolithic (ca 8 ka BP) to the first half of the 20th century. This indicates that organization of bear burial grounds and cemeteries is a stable phenomenon emerging in ancient times and surviving until today (Gasilin, Gorbunov, 2018; Efremova, 2020; Kosintsev, 2000; Okladnikov, 1950; Timokhin, 1969; Kirillova et al., 2022; Losey et al., 2013).

Eurasian and North American ethnographic evidence shows that various sacred practices that were formed around the bear contain a common conceptual

layer: the animal comes to human society as inhabitant of other world; people kill it, skin it, and butcher the carcass; after some time, the taiga predator becomes reborn in its original form and comes to people again (Vasilevich, 1971; Zolotarev, 1939: 121–133; Frazer, 1998: 528–540, 546–547; Hallowell, 1926: 84; Kwon, 1999).

The traditional experience of the hunting peoples may help us to uncover the nature of influence of animals on human existence in the worldview of ancient people. Currently, after reviewing the accumulated ethnographic evidence, a number of anthropologists have drawn attention to the fact that the world order of hunters and fishermen, as opposed to cattle breeders and farmers, is based on the belief in superiority of animals, and not humans, over the natural environment, since animals build their relationships with the world and act as active independent principle. Free agency of animal nature becomes manifest in the bear cult. People communicate with the animal not simply as with animate object, but as with rational being, a kind of duplicate of the human person ("other than human being", "non-human") (Bird-David, 1999; Hill, 2010; Lien, Pálsson, 2019). It is assumed that the bear acts and experiences emotions similar to humans, and has social relationships with its relatives.

According to the leading anthropologists and ethnologists such as T. Ingold (1994), E. Hill (2010), M. Lien and G. Pálsson (2019), R. Willerslev (2007), anthropomorphization of the animal world is based on the daily perceptual experience of gatherers, hunters, and fishermen, who include the animals with whom they are forced to contact into their close circle. The emergence of such relationships can be regarded as a mechanism of natural selection, which involves interspecific competition and struggle for existence. Adapting to ecological niches and striving to gain access to vital resources, humans and animals build relationships according to the predator-prey pattern or assume the position of rivals (MacArthur, Wilson, 2001). Along with that, burials of animals that were buried like people and discovered by archaeologists and ethnographers, as well as the use of allegorical expressions and words of gratitude addressed to such animals, reflect a respectful and reverent attitude of humans towards them. This may also serve as evidence of deep integration of bears into social environment of people. Immersing itself into human existence, it undergoes a bodily metamorphosis taking off his "fur clothing", which in the ritual practices of the hunting peoples was formalized in the act of skinning a killed animal. In these communities, interaction with the outside world is based precisely on the idea of shapeshifting, where both man and animal can change their physical shells.

Anthropologist David Anderson, who has been studying the peoples of the Arctic and Subarctic regions for many years, defined the phenomenon when a person does not see a clear boundary between himself and objects of the surrounding world as "relational identity" (2000). It is expressed in fluid and situational self-identification of a person, when an individual moves from one identity to another during his lifetime or simultaneously adheres to several identities. The same positioning mechanism applies to the animal environment, when the person sees "other persons" or "people" in it (Willerslev, 2007: 6). The "human" capacities of the bear disclose in the conditions of outwordly being, when it not only meets with its relatives, but also acts as executor of the will of "earthly people" and messenger from their society in the status of ancestor or relative.

The idea of transformation of the taiga predator into a human and back has deep ontological meaning and social implications among the indigenous population of the Lower Amur region—the Nivkhs, Ulchi, and Nanai people. The ritual models that have evolved in this region—from raising a bear among the people to killing it in a den during a hunt—suggest cultural mutual influences reflecting elements of animal worship, typical of Siberia and South Asia. The data collected by researchers of bear ceremonies among the Nivkhs, Ulchi, and Nanai people require reinterpretation and revision in ontological context, using new conceptual and representational complexes, which show the world model of the inhabitants of taiga and river space in more detail. This study intends to identify the role of the bear in the perception and cognition of the environment by fishing and hunting communities from the Amur River valley, using accumulated ethnographic evidence and new conceptual tools.

"Other Man": Status of the bear in the Holarctic region peoples worldview

The area of ritual practices associated with bears lies within the boundaries of coniferous, broad-leaved, boreal, mountain, and evergreen forests of Eurasia

and North America. Ecological niches occupied by different subspecies of the brown bear (*Ursus Arctos*), which became the key figure in the natural environment of man, emerged in these regions. Using the findings of comparative analysis of bear rituals and ceremonial complexes by G.M. Vasilevich, B.A. Vasiliev, and A.I. Hallowell, two main levels of people's interaction with bears can be distinguished: hunting rituals, its killing in a den (early Eurasian-American), and keeping the animal in captivity (late, conventionally Ainu, Amur region) (Vasilevich, 1971; Vasiliev, 1948; Hallowell, 1926). Ritual actions and vocabulary used point to the well-established images of the bear that were not associated with hunting trophies or domesticated wild animals. In the mythical narratives of the taiga peoples, the main inhabitant of the forest is endowed with human qualities: "Little – Nice – Mosne", Mansi; "Kheladan", Evenki; "When grizzlies walked upright", Modoc people (Mify..., 2005: 71–77; Sbornik materialov..., 1936: 38–40; American Indian Myths..., 1984: 85–87). Despite the regional specificity of bear anthropomorphization, all of its likenesses fit into a single model of worldview.

The substitutive names of bear among different peoples reflect their ideas about the human nature of the predator, and can be divided into groups. The metaphorical expressions recorded among the Algonquins, Yakuts, Finno-Ugric peoples, and Tuvans, such as "son of the chieftain" (Algonquin), "lord", "worthy old man" (Yakut), "pride of the forest country" (Finno-Ugric), "king of the rocks" (Tuvan), not only distinguish the bear from other forest creatures, but also emphasize its high social status. A separate group of epithets recorded among the Algonquins, Yakuts, and Tunguses indicate the kinship of bears with humans: "elder brother", "cousin", "grandfather", "grandmother", "good father", etc. (Hallowell, 1926: 47–50; Vasiliev, 1948: 80–81). According to a number of anthropologists and ethnographers, such designations should be viewed in the context of hunting magic when a hunter (or fisherman) uses substitutive names of an animal in order to facilitate its capture. Animals are given "false" names to deceive and confuse their patron spirits and to divert anger from a man. Notably, after the death of the bear, the sentiment of addressing it changes from respectful to evaluative and stereotypical. The Algonquins call the dead beast "black food", "short tail", "angry", or "cat or lynx-like creature" (Vasiliev, 1948: 81; Frazer, 1998: 25–31; Hallowell, 1926: 43–46).

The examples of respectful, kinship-related, and derogatory emphatic constructions reflect specific aspects of the worldview. These lexemes are a kind of signs of people's presence in the world on which their welfare depends. The otherness of its inhabitants is emphasized by the metaphors such as "four-legged human", "old man with the fur garment", "mountain man", "forest woman", etc. (Vasiliev, 1948: 81; Hallowell, 1926: 46, 51).

The bear in the status of "other man" most clearly appears in the Tungus folklore. G.M. Vasilevich thoroughly studied oral lore of the Evenki and identified several layers of "bear" myths, which demonstrate the original component in the system of images and beliefs among the hunting and reindeer herding peoples of Siberia. In her opinion, the designations of the bear in fairytales are based on the territorial names of tribal groups, which were in close contact with the ancient Tunguses. For example, the word *ngamendri* from the narratives is associated with the Yenisei-Angara region, *mangi* with the Angara-Lena-Northern Baikal region, and *torganei* ~ *torgandri* ~ *torgani* with the Middle Amur region and the Sea of Okhotsk coast (Vasilevich, 1971: 153–157). The inclusion of these words in the Evenki fairy-tale prose shows how the bear cult reached the Tungus-speaking population, and reflects the specific aspects of interethnic and interclan communications in their society, clearly expressed in the Tungus version of the bear ritual. Notably, groups being in mutual marital relations participated in the ritual, which involved killing the animal in its den, butchering, eating, and burying its bones. The leading role was played by the relatives by marriage, those of the wife and mother. The traditional division of the entire circle of bear ceremony participants into the strata of "sons-in-law" and "fathers-in-law" manifests the idea of matchmaking, which was originally embedded in the bear cult. This is confirmed by the use of words with the root *da* (*da(n)*, *dakha*, *davun* mean 'to convey a request, someone else's words during matchmaking', 'matchmaker', 'petitioner', 'relative by marriage') during the ceremony (Anisimov, 1958: 120–122; Vasilevich, 1971: 164–168). A similar nature of relationship between the performers of a sacred ritual is also recorded in the tradition of *nimat* (*nimak* 'stranger'), which implies handling a killed bear. According to this tradition, a hunter is obliged to give his catch to a member of another clan from which his clan takes wives. Relatives on the mother's side are

engaged in skinning and butchering of the beast (this is called "covering the wound on the bear's body"), and they invite the hunter and their "fathers-in-law" to eat the cooked meat (Anisimov, 1958: 108–110). In ritual actions, the bear may become an actor and act as both the outsider and the relative of a person. This can be seen in the act when the participants in the ceremony are likened to crows, that is, strangers, speaking the language incomprehensible to the bear (Ibid.: 106–110; Vasilevich, 1971: 168). Essentially, the Evenki bear ritual conventionally demonstrates the relationships between strangers and relatives. These symbolic actions may be based on historical events associated with incorporation of "other people"—natives of the mountain taiga and tundra zone—into the Proto-Tungus tribes and clans.

In the Evenki narratives, noteworthy is also another episode with a purely ontological meaning. In the myth of Kheladan, the heroine butchers the *ngamondri* bear: she places the heart next to herself, intestines opposite the entrance behind the hearth (*malu*), pours the wool into a hole, and hangs small intestines on a branch of a leaning tree. In the morning, she discovers that an old man and old woman are sleeping opposite her; deer are wandering next to the chum, and horse's halters are hanging on the leaning tree (Sbornik materialov..., 1936: 40). In the myth of Gurivul, the bear, who gives people various dyes and tools for processing leather, sacrifices itself (Ibid.: 47). These mythical scenes contain the idea that the beast ensures the cyclical nature of human life. In the worldview of the Evenki, the sacrificial bear acts as a donor of reindeer and domestic craftmanship. As a "non-human", it regulates marital contacts and social ties, and takes upon itself the authority to materialize the ideal world of people.

"Taiga relative" in the folklore and ritual practices of the Amur Valley peoples

Since ancient times, the Lower Amur region was a place of mutual influence of cultural traditions from Siberia, the Pacific coast, and Southeast Asia, which was reflected in ritualistic and ceremonial activities of the local population, including the bear cult. Fishing and hunting groups in the floodplain and taiga areas of the Amur River basin adhered to two ritual forms of bear veneration. The first form developed in line with the Siberian (Tungus) traditions, and included killing a bear in a den, with subsequent hanging of its bones on tree branches (Samar Y.A., 1978; Timokhin, 1969). The second form, recorded in the Amur (Ainu) communities, involved purchasing or capturing a bear cub in the forest, keeping it in captivity for several years, and ritual killing. In this ritual complex, some scholars see traces of cultural borrowing from East/Southeast Asia where the practice of keeping animals—leopards, monkeys, snakes, or lizards—as spiritual patrons and protectors of settlements originated (Vasiliev, 1948: 94–96; Shternberg, 1933: 580). After entering the Amur region, this custom was transformed according to the needs of the hunting community.

For the inhabitants of the Lower Amur taiga, the bear was associated with their natural environment, which provided for their wellbeing. It is no coincidence that in the vocabulary of the Nanai and Ulchi peoples, the bear received the meaning of "old man, grandfather" (*mapa*/*mafa*) and was perceived as an ancestor. This was reflected in the Tungus form of the ceremony: an important detail was rendering honors to the eldest man in the group of bear hunters or to the *penter* hunter, who discovered the animal's den. An inevitable part of this ritual was hanging of bear bones on the branches of a tree (this followed the stages of skinning, butchering, and boiling the meat in a large cauldron) (Lopatin, 1922: 203–206; Onenko, 1980: 258; Smolyak, 1976: 145; Sunik, 1987: 21). Such aerial burial was recorded at the bear cemetery (*Vaiyo*/*Vayo*) not far from the Nanai village of Kondon (Samar Y.A., 1978; Smolyak, 1976: 148; Timokhin, 1969). Such "ossuaries" with skeletal bones arranged in anatomical order can be considered the embodiment of people's care for the afterlife of the main taiga predators. It was probably believed that exactly in the other world the bear's special qualities were activated, which made it the benefactor, donor, and patron for people.

The study of the Nivkh, Ulchi, and Nanai mythological and ritual layers associated with bears shows that in the reality, from which the taiga beast influences the world of people, it has the role of a "mountain, forest man-spirit" (*Palnivkh* – Nivkh), "bear-man" (*tkhyvan nig"vdy* – Nivkh), "mountain man" (*tkhyf-pal nig"vn"* – Nivkh), or "taiga man" (*duenteni* – Ulchi; *duenteni edeni* – Nanai) (Zolotarev, 1939: 112; Kreinovich, 1973: 173, 175; Savelieva, Taksami, 1970: 250; Smolyak, 1976: 145). His

"taiga world", which is a mirror image of earthly life, is accessible through the bear's den. This "world" is a separate space, with a settlement consisting of large houses where "bear-people" live in related groups. Each of their clans is related by blood to a certain clan of regular people. From their earthly relatives, the "bear-people" receive gifts and treats, some of which they distribute to their neighbors (Kreinovich, 1973: 170–175; Taksami, 1976: 215–216).

The "bear" legends that have survived until today are united by one plot, manifesting the relationship between the "forest" and regular people. It describes the den-dwelling owners watching how regular people are approaching their shelter. The woman of the house decides to go out to meet them. One version says that she puts on the skin, turns into a bear, and comes out of the den. The hunters kill her, butcher, put the pieces of meat in knapsacks, and go down the mountain. After some time, the she-bear with a large knapsack on her shoulders goes up the mountain (to the den) accompanied by four dogs. She first distributes the food she brought to other bear clans, and the rest of the food is kept by her household members. Another version of the legend says that the woman falls backwards, turns into a bear, comes out of the den, and the hunters kill her (Zolotarev, 1939: 123; Kreinovich, 1973: 174). The key point in these stories was the transformation of the "bear-man", the acquisition of bear or human form by putting on or shedding the skin. It was the culmination of the bear ritual. Its meaning was to create the body of the "taiga man"; in the ritual act, this corresponded to skinning the bear, similar to the process of removing clothes from a person*. For example, in this case, the Nivkhs called skinning of the beast *laz'nd*, while skinning of an ordinary animal was called *iznd*. During the removal of bearskin, people left uncut areas (three for males and four for females), which were then torn apart with fingers. These areas symbolized the *u"gr* buttons. In addition to these, another strip was left on the bearskin, which was called *vals*—belt (according to the Nivkhs, the bear uses this belt to carry a small *mly* bag with tinder, red flint, and iron steel for striking fire) (Kreinovich, 1973: 210–211).

The meaning-making component in the creation of the "taiga" man's body was the "road". According to the Ulchi, the bear, after crossing 40 ridges and cleaning itself of dirt on the way, returned to its taiga relatives by the "old man's road" or the "taiga road" (*mafa poktoni/duente poktoni*) (Zolotarev, 1939: 112, 123–124). Among the Nivkhs, the "mountain bear man" descended from the mountain to its "lowland" relatives and then returned home by overcoming the ascent (Kreinovich, 1973: 174).

The peoples of the Amur-Sakhalin region regarded the bear as a messenger of the "other" people with whom earthly people were connected by strong ties and obligations; therefore, the bear ritual was sometimes closely intertwined with funerary rite. Among the Nivkhs and Ulchi, it was customary for the relatives of the deceased to take a bear cub for keeping it in his/her memory. Treating the bear cub as a dear and welcome guest, people thereby expressed a request to the "bear-people", with whom their deceased relative ended up, to provide him/her with assistance and the same warm welcome that the "taiga" man received from regular people (Zolotarev, 1939: 114, 122; Kreinovich, 1973: 160, 176). E.A. Kreinovich observed all stages of the Nivkh ritual of sending a bear to its taiga brethren, and recorded an important point: the participants in the process first lowered the bear's skin through the smoke hole of the dugout, and then a small boy (1973: 218–219). This ceremony was dedicated to the death of the son of its organizer, and possibly implied the motif of the child's soul rebirth under the patronage of the "mountain (taiga)" people.

Another way to ensure support from the representatives of the "mountain (taiga)" world was to pronounce the substitutive name assigned to the bear by its owner or deceased person belonging to the third generation back, and after some time, to name the newborn son of the organizer of the ceremony by this name (Kreinovich, 1973: 220).

Patronage of the "bear-people" could also be gained by establishing family ties with them. According to the Nivkhs, this could be achieved by the clan of a hunter who was scratched, touched, or killed by a bear. Notably, among the Nanai people, a person who suffered from the beast was not awarded such honors. He and his relatives would become *galku nai*, that is, carriers of a special dangerous *gala* force; so their communication with other people was limited (Smolyak, 1976: 152–153; Taksami, 1976: 213).

*The Amur Nivkhs and Ulchi used the phraseological expressions "make a bear" (*kotr nyd'* – Nivkh), "work with a bear" (*kotrkir tynzd'* – Nivkh), "act as a bear" (*buyumba khupi* – Ulchi) in relation to this sacred ritual (Zolotarev, 1939: 121–122; Osipova, Temina, 2008: 57).

The most common way for regular people to get closer to "taiga people" was cohabitation with a representative of the latter, or conceiving from him, which was reflected in a number of the Lower Amur narratives (Zolotarev, 1939: 125; Kreinovich, 1973: 174–175; Nanaiskiy folklor..., 1996: 235–243). According to the Nivkhs and Ulchi, woman's close relations with the "mountain (taiga)" spirit resulted in a twin birth. The fact that the mother and these twins belonged to the world of the "mountain people" determined a special path for their posthumous existence. Unlike ordinary villagers, they were buried in a bear cage, without being burned (when describing their death, instead of *mud* the word *pnyud* was used, which referred to a bear kept in a cage) (Zolotarev, 1939: 140–142; Kreinovich, 1973: 390–395, 426–440).

The culmination of the bear ritual among the Lower Amur peoples was enactment of the plot of departure—the farewell of the main protagonist. According to the mythical story, a she-bear leaves the people who nursed and raised her, and returns to her fellow bears. In his monograph on the Nivkhs, Kreinovich provided an interesting detail: when a bear cub is brought to a village, on the second day it is given special food *n'azl avgu mos* 'jelly for gluing heels'. Such jelly is given to a girl before sending her to another clan, which makes it possible to compare the bear cub with marriageable girl (Kreinovich, 1973: 178). The comparison of a bear with bride can also be observed in the rituals of the Gorin Nanai people. In addition to the ritual killing of a bear in its den, they had a custom of raising a bear cub brought from the forest in order to give it then to the Ulchi people for their bear ritual. It was usually a three-year-old bear, which, regardless of sex, had moved from the *khoyor* age category to the *puer* category*. The *puer* name was also related to the farewell ceremony, which basically reiterated the wedding ritual of the Lower Amur peoples. The "bride" in the bear guise was seated in a wedding boat, mourned, and was taken away from home to the Ulchi or Nivkhs (Samar E.D., 2003: 37–38; Smolyak, 1982: 232). The same subtext, which identifies a woman as a departing and arriving component of the clan, is embedded in the ceremony of sending a bear to its taiga relatives. Wives, sisters, and daughters usually did not participate in the ritual acts of raising, killing, and butchering the bear. Certain fragments of the butchered carcass, which were considered taboo female parts, were set aside for them. For example, among the Nivkhs, female parts (*shan"k"inf*) included three long and three short ribs, vertebrae, shoulder blades, and pelvic bones; meat of the lumbar part was given to sisters, who were considered belonging to different clans or tribes (Kreinovich, 1973: 215–216).

Researchers of bear ceremonial complexes classified the Lower Amur as a region where the bear cult was organically integrated into the social and clan differentiation (Shrenk, 1903: 64–103; Hallowell, 1926: 106–120). The relationships between foreigners (relatives by marriage from other clans) and blood relatives were determined by the same principles as those between fathers-in-law and sons-in-law. When performing ritual actions, this was regulated by specific rules. Among the Nivkhs, a person who raised a bear cub could not kill it nor eat its meat, since such bear was considered his relative. These ritual actions had to be performed by the son-in-law—the foreigner; ritual killing of the animal was carried out on the *n"anyu* site, which belonged to the father-in-law's clan (Kreinovich, 1973: 180–181, 193, 256). Among the Ulchi, if a bear was bought, it had to be shot by one of the mother's brothers or *gusi*/*gamasun* sons-in-law (Zolotarev, 1939: 112).

Social and regulatory role of the bear is also associated with the *dokha* institution, which emerged in the Lower Amur as a form of unification of clans. Using the Nivkhs as example, L.Y. Shternberg showed that an important part of the consolidation process was the organization of a common bear festival. Each *kkhal* (clan) was obliged to buy from one to four bears, which were killed after one or two years, and the meat was always distributed among the members of the adopted clans (Shternberg, 1933: 297–299). The function of the bear as an exponent of the clan principle is recorded in the traditions of the Ulchi. One of the carriers and keepers of these traditions, M.S. Duvan, mentioned in his family history that settlers, having come to new places, adopted bears, whose number indicated the wellbeing of their families (FMA, the village of Bulava, 1991, 1992).

The tradition of raising a bear cub with people, which evolved among the Lower Amur peoples, also had a social and economic aspect. Preparing a bear for the ceremony of killing required much effort

*The word *puer*, which denotes a three- to four-year-old bear cub, was used in the rituals to denote "bride" (Onenko, 1980: 340).

and material costs from its owner. According to field researchers, owner of the bear, in order to feed his "fosterling", had to prepare much yukola, fish, berries (these ingredients were used for making *mos* jelly for the bear), and buy rice with the money earned from selling furs. It was only during the ritual that relatives on the wife's or daughter's side might compensate the beast's owner for all his expenses (Kreinovich, 1973: 179, 181–182). When making the *dokha* alliance, the relations between the host clans and adopted clans took the form of symbolic exchange. After performing the bear ritual, the host side offered new relatives a flint in exchange for their dogs; this act sealed the agreement on mutual assistance (Shternberg, 1933: 297–298). The bear ritual, after becoming a part of internal exchange between the communities living in different parts of the Amur River basin, was modified over time. For example, the Gorin Nanai people supplied the Ulchi with bear cubs in exchange for large boats which could be used to go out into the Sea of Okhotsk and sail to China. All the above suggests that for the Lower Amur peoples the bear was the embodiment of the patron of forest wealth, equivalent of exchange, expression of social status, and marker of social differentiation.

Transformation of the bear role in the worldview of the Lower Amur peoples: from sacred person to representative of the fauna

The bear cult in the Lower Amur region contains an archaic layer associated with hunting cultures; however, its social connotation was constantly redefined. With the development of trade relations in the Lower Amur, communication between neighbors evolved beyond kinship and family ties, and took the form of economic and business contacts. This new model of relationships included symbolic actions built over many generations and based on new ontological motives. For example, in the traditions of the Gorin Nanai, the bear that was sent to the Ulchi no longer played the role of an intermediary between "taiga otherness" and human existence. In this representational model, the land of "other people" was located in a physically tangible earthly plane. In the social institution of *dokha*, the bear acted as a symbol of the unity of communities from different earthly territories with their own landscape features—taiga and river zones, downstream and upstream river areas, river shore and sea coast (Tugolukov, 1972: 110).

In the late 19th to early 20th centuries, with the arrival of European population with agrarian traditions to the south of the Far East, the local community faced the phenomenon of depersonalization of the taiga space. The new neighbors viewed their natural environment through the lens of economic activities; in their perception of the world, forest predators personified a hindrance, a threat to human life, or resource objects. When settling in new territories, the migrants primarily cleared them of forests to construct houses and utility buildings, and to create arable fields and pastures. In the eyes of the indigenous population, the very act of cutting down trees could be regarded as destruction of the "taiga people's" home and the core of their universe associated with hunting. The report of the Organization of Local Governments, which provided medical and food assistance to new settlers in the Far East, stated that owing to intensive logging and burning of forests, the indigenous people migrated after animals who had gone deep into the taiga. The differences in the approaches to land management were manifested in the division of space between the indigenous community of the Amur region and the new settlers. "Russian hunters almost never enter the indigenous people reign, while the natives never intrude into the sphere of influence of the Russians" (Priamurye..., 1909: 268). The 1907 statistical reports on the Goldy (Nanai) population of Khabarovsk Uyezd cited the data testifying to the prevailing attitude towards bears as hunting trophies, and not as exponent of sacred essence (the indigenous hunters killed twenty bears, and the Russians only three). However, data confirm the surviving ritual importance of bears among the Gilyaks (Nivkhs) at that time: out of 74 bears procured by them, 64 were alive and were used to hold the bear festival (Ibid.: 268, 290).

Changes in the life of the Lower Amur communities in the 1920–1930s during the Soviet reforms transformed their worldview. Dominance of river fishing among the occupations of these peoples and transformation of the settlement structure due to construction of collective farms led to the decline of hunting and to the fading of the importance of bear as a key figure in the structure of human life. In the 1930s, introduction of the norms of literary language into everyday communication fostered the changes in the perception of taiga environment by the indigenous population. The transition from

acoustic to graphic forms of language became a turning point in the meaning-making and word formation for them. In oral languages, phonetics plays a large role. As noted by scholars who designed the first alphabets of the Nivkh and Nanai languages*, the identification of all phonemes and the assignment of graphic signs to them were the hardest tasks, since some phonemes were difficult to discern by ear and transcribe, which led to a reduced understanding of what was said. In addition, pronouncing the same word in different tones could change its semantics. Each concept reflected nuances of movements and actions, landscape features, or age and sex differences in different animal species in specific situations, while in the Russian-language version it was associated with the entire phrase. Transformation of the social order influenced the language structure, which determined new boundaries of understanding the world. The need to create new concepts and expressions arose, in order to designate the objects and phenomena brought into the indigenous environment. Their semantic content was conveyed with the equivalents that were essentially the lexical constructions. For example, in the Nivkh language, the concept of "worker" was interpreted as the "person living on his own" (p'səŋgir hum-nivx), "hospital" as the "house that fixes itself" (p'fəɦvəɦ-dəi) (Kreinovich, 1934: 187–188). The same semantic distortions emerged from attempts to transfer the vocabulary of fishermen or hunters into the graphic signs. The words have lost their connection to the life experience, and became generalized concepts and categories (Avrorin, 1959; Alkor (Koshkin), 1931; Arefiev, 2014: 34–43; Kreinovich, 1934). In the school education system, acquisition of knowledge and learning the grammar rules were based on materialistic concept of the structure of reality, in which animals were a part of physical nature.

The extent to which the innovations were consistent with the norms of life, developing over many generations, can be seen in the example of "bear" terminology, where many terms are related to ritual activities and social sphere. It comprises a lot of words denoting the details of the bear anatomy, as well as attributes and human actions associated with it. Notably, another way of transmitting information about the bear was the pictographic script discovered among the Nivkhs in 1929. It consisted of contour and relief images of bear, which were used to decorate wooden ritual utensils. Together, all these figurines revealed the circumstances of capturing or purchasing a bear cub, and its maturation up to the moment of killing (Kreinovich, 1934: 184–186). In the new language format, the sacred "bear" vocabulary was mentioned in the context of reviewing the past, and was no longer relevant. During the period of dominant atheistic ideology, the substitutive names of the bear, designations of bear ritual paraphernalia, ceremonial performers and actions, and "taiga" cosmography have lost their practical basis.

Field studies in the post-Soviet period in the areas of the Ulchi and Nanai residence revealed the loss of the bear's status as the "taiga man" in their social life. However, the surviving family histories and fragments of bear ritual complexes (musical logs) demonstrated the scale of the bear cult in the lower reaches of the Amur River in the past. Its existence as a social phenomenon was observed in the area from the Amur River estuary to the regions bordering China, where the competitor to the bear was the tiger. The most vivid memories of the respondents were of sex distribution of roles during the bear festival, taboos for women, following the soul of a killed bear along the "road of the dead" (Ulchi *bulyanchu*), and unity of relatives during the ritual (FMA: E.M. Digor, the village of Belgo, 1990; M.S. Duvan, the village of Bulava, 1991; I. Valdyu, the village of Savinskoye, 1996; V.M. Samar, the village of Kondon, 1998).

In the wake of rising interest in traditional heritage, in 1992, residents of the village of Bulava in the Ulchsky District decided to celebrate the bear festival after a long break. For this purpose, they specially bred a bear cub for two years. The preparation of the ceremonial site, ritual killing, butchering, organization of a feast with elements of competition between two groups of participants ("people of taiga" and "people of water"), burial of the bear's bones with smoking of its skull—everything was strictly regulated and carried out in compliance with the canons. However, these actions received mixed response from the public. The main question of how much this ritual is in demand today was addressed to the organizers and performers. Nowadays, re-establishment and preservation of cultural complexes from the pre-literate stages of history remain a controversial topic. The indigenous

*Since 1932, Latin-based writing systems were created for all small peoples of the North; since 1937, these were translated into Cyrillic (Arefiev, 2014: 39–42).

people from the Ulchsky, Nanaisky, and Solnechny districts of the Khabarovsk Territory face the problem of how to "revive" the forgotten bear cult. They realize that revering the "taiga man" has ceased to be the unifying idea for the village community in the changed social environment. Earlier, the image of the bear was associated with patronage of taiga elements, gift exchange, creation of interclan unions, hunting ethics, and norms of social order, while at present the beast is perceived as a representative of the animal world, dangerous to humans.

Conclusions

The Lower Amur peoples (Nivkhs, Ulchi, Nanai) have a tradition of revering the bear, which has both universal and specific aspects. The concept of the bear as the "other man", an individual with its own character and conscious behavior, is common for the traditions of all indigenous communities in the Holarctic zone. In the Lower Amur, the established attitude to the bear as a representative of "taiga/mountain humanity" was complemented by its perception as a relative of man. This was reflected in the worldview where human society and the "taiga people" were inextricably linked. "Bear-people" in their world lived in related groups, which had relatives among people. Close relationships between human and bear clans were embodied in ritual practices. In the Amur form of bear worship, known as the bear festival, the animal raised among people was killed, skinned, and butchered; after the feast, the bones and smoked skull were buried in a special cribwork. In this way, the "bear-man" was believed to leave its human relatives and return to its abode, acquiring true body on the way.

Among the Nivkhs, Ulchi, and Nanai people, the relations between the "bear-men" (who personified the "others") and representatives of human groups (who acted as relatives) in fact reflected a sophisticated social relationship in mythical and ritualistic form. The basis of this interaction was the mechanism of strengthening family ties through the institutions of marriage and *dokha* (unification of clans), as well as the practice of business contacts. Communication, represented both in the mythic-ritualistic realm and in the physical world, ensured the acquisition of material benefits (hunting and fishing catch, food, household and utility items, means of transportation), conclusion of a social contract on mutual assistance, and maintaining parity in all areas of activities. Additional semantic essence of the bear manifested itself as a standard of exchange and expression of social status in this sophisticated configuration of social relations; the attitude towards the beast determined the development of hunting rules and norms of social life.

Since the early 20th century, the image of the bear as the "taiga/mountain man" among the Lower Amur indigenous peoples began to fade owing to social and economic changes in the Far East caused by the influx of the European population with agricultural traditions and weakening of the importance of hunting in the economies of local households. With transition to written languages, which acted as filters in world perception, and introduction of materialistic concept of the structure of reality through the network of educational institutions, the bear began to be recognized as a symbol associated with traditions of the past, and a representative of the animal world.

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