

Bear Mythologies of Scandinavia

In Scandinavia, there was a firm belief in the ability of some people to change into or assume the characteristics of bears. Our English word "berserk" comes from this legend. It was thought that if a warrior was to don a bear-skin shirt (called a bear-sark) which had been treated with oils and herbs, that the warrior would gain the strength, stamina, and power of the animal. These people would be driven into a frenzy in battle and were said to be capable of biting through the enemy's shields or walking through fire without injury. No matter how much of the legend is true, the thought of a group of Vikings made up as bears is sobering.

The Greeks

The pre-Classical Greeks also believed in the ability of men to become bears. One of the most commonly told stories is that of Callisto, who bore a child of Zeus--Arcas. Hera, Zeus' wife, became jealous and transformed Callisto into a bear as punishment. Arcas, out hunting, came upon his mother and shot at her. Zeus, taking pity on the mother and son, changed them into Ursa Major and Ursa Minor, the two great bear constellations. From this one myth comes a whole score of others.

For instance, Arcas' name comes from the Greek word for bear--Arctos. By extension, the "Arkades" of Arcadia are supposedly descended from Arcas. Their name means bear-people.

The Callisto myth also blends very well into the werewolf myth of Lycaon. According to legend, Callisto was Lycaon's daughter. Arcas was the individual who was supposed to have been served to Zeus as a test of the god's divinity, but he managed to escape. Even one of the synonyms for bear used by the Greeks, bee-wolf (for the bear's love of honey), managed to make it into legend. A legend, in fact, which was the first great work of the English language.

Spirit Names

In many cultures, the bear was looked upon with such reverence that members of the culture were not allowed to speak the word for "bear ". Instead, they referred to the animal with varied and creative euphemisms. These euphemisms are related here. The general category of nA refers to names that were wide-spread through several native American groups.

The Bear Ritual of the Ainu

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The Ainu are an aboriginal hunter/gatherer/fisher people who once inhabited many of the islands that bound the southern half of the Sea of Okhotsk north of the main Japanese island of Honshu. There were Ainu populations, now extinct, who were on the Kurile islands.¹ The few hundred Ainu who inhabited the southern half of Sakhalin Island were relocated to the northern Japanese island of Hokkaido at the end of World War II when Sakhalin became a territory of the recently defunct USSR.² The Ainu native to Hokkaido are, and were, the most numerous and are the best known to the outside world; they are still living on Hokkaido, although their tribal culture has been obliterated. The origins of the Ainu have been a puzzle to physical anthropologists since they were first observed by Westerners in the late nineteenth century. They are not a Japanese or Mongoloid people for they have wavy hair, abundant body hair, frequent lack of the epicanthic fold about the eyes and a well developed chin. A variety of archeological and dental evidence suggests that the Ainu are descendants of the Jomon people of the early Neolithic in Japan and that the Jomon people are, therefore, not the ancestors of the present day Japanese (Ohnuki-Tierney 1974, Turner 1976).