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The Finno-Karelian bear skull rituals: Bringing the bruin home to ensure its regeneration

By Vesa Matteo Piludu

Keywords: Finno-Karelian bear skull ritual, sacred pine, return of the bear to its birth land, "sending-off" rituals, regeneration of the bear, treatment of bones, testimony of the bear

*Abstract: In this chapter I analyse the third and last part of the Finno-Karelian bear ceremonialism. In a solemn procession the hunters carried the bear's skull and bones to a sacred pine in the forest. The skull was hung on one of its branches, and the bones were buried under its roots. During the bear skull rituals, the hunters stressed that the skull was not thrown on the ice, it was hung on a good and sacred tree, and it was brought to the mythic place where the bear was born – in the sky, nearby the constellation of the Plough (*Ursa Maior*), or in the sacred forest. The bear was brought back to the world of its guardian spirits (*haltias*) and parents, which were able to ensure the bruin's regeneration from its bones. All the honours shown to the bear skull were fundamental to achieve its regeneration and to obtain good luck in the hunt for the future, as the bruin was supposed to tell the spirits about its treatment. In this chapter, I will also compare the Finno-Karelian, Ob-Ugrian, Siberian and North American traditions about the "sending-off" rituals, the regeneration of game animals from bones, and the bear's testimony about its treatment.*

Bringing the bear skull back to the sky

In the last part of the Finnish and Karelian bear ceremonialism the hunters carried the bear's skull and bones in a solemn procession to a sacred pine (see Fig. 1). These final rites followed the bear hunt and the bear feast, in which all the meat and organs of the bear were eaten.[1] The bear skull ritual is called the "disposal of remains" in Hallowell's model of the phases of the bear ceremonialism (Hallowell 1926, 135–144).[2]

The skull (see Figs. 2–3) was hung on one of the tree's branches, and the bones were buried at its foot (Piludu 2019, 267–271). The hunters reassured the bear's soul, singing that they hung its skull in

1 For an analysis of the songs and rites of the bear hunt, the bear feast, the source materials, and the vernacular conceptions of the forest, see Piludu, this volume, on the songs and rituals of the Finno-Karelian bear hunt, and on the Finno-Karelian bear feast and wedding.

2 For an analysis of the theories of Hallowell, see Piludu, this volume, on the songs and rituals of the Finno-Karelian bear hunt.

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a special place of honour. In the village Pesiö, Moilanen, "the old man of Kylämäki",[3] emphasised in his song that the hunters hung the skull at the right height and in the right direction: "We did not put [it] badly, / we put [it] on the thickest of the trees, / on the lower of the branches, / on the broadest of the sprigs, / not too high, / to marvel at the Plough, / to observe the stars" (*Emmä panneet pahasti, / panimma puuta paksummalle, / oksia alovimmalle, / lehviä levehimmalle, / emmäkä kovin yläälle, / otavien ouvostella, / tähtien tähystellä*; SKVR XII2/6573, 1–8, Pesiö, Suomussalmi, Kainuu, Finland, 1917).[4]

The reference to the Plough (*Ursa Maior*) is extremely meaningful, as this constellation was mentioned in several *The Birth of the Bear (Karhun synty)* incantations uttered by cattle herders to protect the cattle from bears during the grazing season (Piludu 2019, 136–144; SKVR XII2/6464). Ukko Timonen of Kiteenlahti sang: "There was *ohto* (the bear) given birth to, / the honey-paw turned around; / high up in the sky, / on the shoulders of the Plough. / How was it brought down? / With a thread it was brought down, / with a silver thong, / in a golden cradle, / then it left roaming the woodlands, / striding the Northland" (*Tuolla ohto synnytelty, / mesikämmen kiännätelty: / ylähällä taivosessa, / Otavaisen olkapäillä. / Missä se alas laskettiin? / Hihnassa alas laskettiin, / hihnassa hopiisessa, / kultaisessa kätkyyssä, / sitte läks saloja samuumaan, / pohjanmoata polokemaan*; SKVR VII5/3932, 3–12, Kiteenlahti, Kitee, North Karelia, Finland, Ukko Timonen, 1894).

The anthropologist Matti Sarmela[5] connects the bear skull rites with the *The Birth of the Bear in the Sky* incantation, stating that the bear skull "was returned to the pine, where according to the myth of the bear origin it was brought down from the sky" (Sarmela 1982, 64; 1991, 220). Many other Finnish scholars interpreted the bear's return to its original birth land as a possible prelude for his regeneration (Kuusi 1963, 49; Haavio 1967, 22–28; Piludu 2019, 287–294).

To support this theory, many Finnish scholars compared the Finnish *Bear Songs* (the songs performed during the bear ceremonials) with the Ob-Ugrian ones.[6] The most precise source about the return of the bear to the sky after the bear ceremonialism is a Khanty[7] *Bear Song*: "I raised myself to heaven again, up to my father God, the seven-throated, / upon an iron chain's end that clinked like silver" (Honko et al. 1993, 153, poem 27). In 1888, Serafim Keropovič Patkanov[8] collected these verses in Shumilovo (Khanty Region, western Siberia). A Khanty hunter or villager interpreted the role of the bear, singing in the first person. In the Khanty tradition, the bear was born in the sky and its father was the god of the sky, Num Torum[9] (Sarmela 1991, 213; Siikala 2008, 142). However, the future resurrection of the bear was not clearly mentioned in the Ob-Ugrian *Bear Songs*. The Khanty song collected by Patkanov refers only to his return to the sky by climbing the iron chain. In the

3 Moilanen was an old *tietäjä* and a hunter. The song was transcribed by Samuli Paulaharju (1875–1944), one of the most active Finnish folklore collectors.

4 SKVR indicates a reference to a song or incantation of the collection *Suomen Kansan Vanhat Runot* (Ancient Songs of the Finnish People). In this chapter the SKVR sources are indicated with the number of the volume (SKVR XII2), followed by the number of the song (/66573) and sometimes the number of the lines (1–2). Additional information can include the parish and village where the song has been collected, the year when the song was collected, the name of the collector and the number of his manuscript, the name of the singer.

5 Matti Sarmela (born in 1937) is an influential Finnish cultural and social anthropologist who wrote intensively on Finnish bear ceremonialism.

6 The Ob-Ugrians (Khanty and Mansi) speak Ob-Ugric languages, a branch of the large Finno-Ugric linguistic family. These languages are spoken in a large geographic area around the Ob and Irtysh rivers in western Siberia. The Ob-Ugrians performed some of the most elaborate bear ceremonials of the Finno-Ugric peoples.

7 The Khanty (in older literature: Ostiak) are an Ob-Ugrian people. Most Khanty live in the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Region (Okrug) in western Siberia (Russia).

8 Serafim Keropovič Patkanov (1860–1918) was a Russian statistician, economist and ethnographer, who collected songs among the Ob-Ugrians.

9 Num Torum lives in the highest level of the sky and is the most important god of the Ob-Ugrians. He is the father of the hero Mir-Susne-Hum.

Khanty *Bear Songs*, the bruin was raised into the sky (after its death) in the same way it was lowered down to earth (after its birth) – with a chain or string (Harva 1933, 298; Haavio 1967, 36).

In the Mansi[10] tradition, after the bear ritual the bruin ended up back in the sky, where the Father-God asked how it had been treated by the humans, and the bear answered that it was satisfied (Haavio 1967, 36). According to Martti Haavio,[11] the Ob-Ugrian ritual followed a mythic model: The first and "primordial" bear was born in the sky near his father, was brought down to earth, where it was killed; it was then resurrected, and finally it rose to its father in the sky. Each bear, being the descendent of the primordial one, had the same right of the "forefather" bear, and the mythical model was followed or repeated in each Ob-Ugrian bear ceremonial. Haavio argued that a similar model should be present also in the Finnish tradition, but the Finno-Karelians did not sing lines clearly referring to the return of the bruin to the sky (Haavio 1967, 36). It is true that a precise return to the sky is not mentioned in the Finno-Karelian songs, as the bruin is only exhorted to look towards the Plough, not to climb back to the constellation on a rope or a chain.[12]

However, in the Finnish and Karelian traditions the songs and incantation referring to the Plough (*Ursa Major* [on bears and the constellations, cf. Künzl, this volume]), the sun, and the moon, are strongly connected to vernacular concepts of birth, life, awakening, and travel. In Ilomantsi the hunters hung the skull towards the Plough, singing: "I set [it] up to watch the moon, / to learn the stars of the Plough, / to observe the sun" (*Panin kuuta kahtomahan, / otavia oppimahan, / päiveä tähystämähän*; SKVR VII5/3396, 12–14, Ilomantsi, North Karelia, Finland, 1846, name of singer not mentioned in the manuscript by the collector Ahlqvist). The singer Antti Varttiainen[13] sang a variation without the Plough: "I left [it] up to watch the moon, / to admire the sun" (*Heitin kuuta kahtomaan, / päjvää ihaamaan*; SKVR VI2/4913, 128–129, Kiuruvesi, North Savo, Finland, 1819).

Similar lines were present in Viena Karelian childbirth incantations: The moon was invited to release the baby's head "over the stars in the sky / over the shoulders of the Plough" (SKVR I4/972, Lonkka, 1834; Tarkka 2013, 393), and the Plough was invited to guide "the man" (the newborn) from "these alien doors" (the mother's uterus, womb, or vagina; SKVR I4/976b, Uhtua, 1889; Tarkka 2013, 393–394; Piludu 2019, 191–192). The bear soul (contained in the bear head and skull, see Fig. 4) was invited to go back to the world of the living beings: it was supposed to watch and follow the same celestial bodies (the moon, the Plough, the sun) that were believed to help a human newborn baby to find the way out from the mother's womb. In Karelian childbirth incantations the newborn child may also fall from the celestial otherworld: "The sky opened over the stable, / out fell the pure apple (the baby)" (*Taivas rakosi tallin päällä, / putosi puhas omena*; SKVR I4/943:2-3, Kiimäsjärvi, Viena Karelia, Russia, Ontrei Ivanoff, 1889; Tarkka 2013, 393). Bears and human beings were believed to have the same mythic origins: They came from the sky.

The shining of the sun and the moon clearly indicated that the bear "continued its life" in the world of the living, because the traditional Finno-Karelian world of the dead was characterised by darkness or the absence of sunlight and moonlight (Tarkka 2005, 303–304). The motif could be con-

10 The Mansi (in older literature: Vogul) are an Ob-Ugrian people. Most Mansi live in the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Region (Okrug) in western Siberia (Russia).

11 Martti Haavio (1899–1973) was one of the most influential Finnish professors of the study of folklore and religions. From 1935 to 1967 he wrote several books on Finnish mythology and folk beliefs that were recently re-published. His most relevant text covering Finnish bear ceremonials is *Suomalainen Mytologia* (1967). He also was an important poet, publishing under the pseudonym P. Mustapää, and a member of the innovative Finnish literary group *Tulenkantajat* (The Flame Bearers), which had the novelist Mika Waltari (1908–1979) as its most famous member at the international level.

12 Between the Ob-Ugrian and Finno-Karelian *The Birth of The Bear in the Sky* songs and incantations there were significative differences, see Piludu 2022. On the complexity and differences present in Khanty and Ob-Ugrians bear ceremonials, see Wiget/Balalaeva 2022.

13 Antti Varttiainen (1764–1833) was a skilled *runolaulaja* (singer) and *tietäjä* (seer) from Kiuruvesi. The historian and writer Adolf Ivar Arwidsson transcribed 33 of Varttiainen's Kalevalaic songs and incantations.

nected to the idea of the regeneration of the bear, rarely described in the songs. If the bear was able to watch the stars and the moon, it was "roaming" again in the world of the living.

The call to learn the stars comprising the Plough was also connected with the idea of awakening and travelling somewhere, as the constellation was important for orientation during the night. In Ladoga Karelia, the bride was advised to be very labourious and wake up before dawn "to learn the stars of the Plough" (SKVR XII2/4358, 6, 1890). Before being shot, the bear was also invited to wake up from the den and hibernation to observe the sun and the moon (Piludu 2019, 191). Leaving for the forest, the Viena Karelian hunters asked the forest spirits to teach them to travel observing the stars and the arc of sky (SKVR I4/1107, 6–7; I4/1253, 16–17).

The impression is that the travel of the bear did not end on the tree branch; therefore, the bruin should recognise the constellation to travel somewhere, to awake from his death and to watch the sun and the moon, as a human newborn does after birth.

The sacred pine, Hongotar, and the bear's return to its birth land in the forest

Other *Bear Songs* contain evidence that the bear skull ritual has the goal to bring back the bear to one of its mythical homelands: the woodland of forest spirits, called Metsola (or Mehtola), Tapiola or Pohjola (or Pohja, the Northland),[14] and the pine where it was born. In the Finnish and Karelian traditions, there was a huge quantity of *The Birth of the Bear* incantations, with many variations (Piludu 2019, 101–153): In the incantations sung by the hunters, the bear was generally born in a mythical forest.

During the bear skull ritual, the hunters sang that they did not discard the skull on the road or left it on the ice and in the snow (SKVR VII2/3396, 1–8, Ilomantsi, North Karelia, Finland, 1846). Antti Huttunen from Iisalmi sang that the hunters did not hang the skull on a rowan or a willow, but "rather on an old pine, the good tree" (*Vaan honkahan hyvähän puuhun*; SKVR VI2/4919, Iisalmi, North Savo, Finland, 1876) or on a "pure tree" (SKVR VII2/3034, Ilomantsi, North Karelia, Finland, 1846).

Matti Sarmela mentioned that no information or songs on the ritual of the bear skull were collected in Viena Karelia (Sarmela 1991, 224; 2009, 79). This information is incorrect. There are songs and statements of singers demonstrating that the ritual of the bear skull was performed in Viena Karelia, too (SKVR I4/1245b, I4/1245c; SKVR I4/1253: 16–17, I4/1943).

Sometimes the bear skull tree could be a spruce or a birch (see Fig. 3), but generally it was a pine (see Fig. 2). The anthropologist Francesco Spagna[15] noted that the pine, being a tall evergreen tree, is deeply connected with concepts of immortality or regeneration (Spagna 1998, 185). It remained a beautiful tree even at the end of winter, when the skull rite was performed. The rowan and the willow were not allowed as bear skull trees: They are not evergreen, they can be sad-looking in the wintertime, and they were not suitable as bear skull trees. In some of *The Birth of the Trees* incantations, the willow is described as a bad tree, created from evil, by a pagan (Krohn 1917, 51), or by the devil (Anttonen 1998, 142).

14 Metsola or Mehtola means "forestland" and it is often associated to Mielikki, the forest mistress or the mistress of the forestland (*metsölän emäntä*), the most important female forest spirit; Tapiola means forestland or the "land of Tapio", the master of the forest, the most important male forest spirit. Pohjola or Pohja means "the Northland"; it was associated with the mistress of Pohjola, an ambiguous and dangerous being able to give birth not only to bears and wolves, but also to lethal illnesses. In epic songs, the Northland is a dangerous, "dark", "man-eating" and "hero-drowning" place (Tarkka 2013, 398), and the mistress of Pohjola has magic powers, beautiful daughters and a magic object forged by the smith Ilmarinen – the Sampo. In the songs for the bear ceremonials, she is a strongly associated with Hongotar, a "mother" and protector of bears. All these placenames are associated to spirits that generate or protect bears.

15 Francesco Spagna is an Italian cultural anthropologist of the University of Padua. He has worked intensively on the folk stories about the marriages between bear and humans, and he is an expert of Native American cultures in Canada.

Only certain pines, spruces, or birches were suitable for the bear skull. Kaarle Krohn observed that the chosen tree was generally a large one (see Fig. 1), and it was measured by being hugged (Krohn 2008, 150). Martti Haavio also stressed that the bear skull tree should be huge (Haavio 1967, 31). Sometimes the tree was situated near the house of the hunter who had performed the circling of the bear, but more often the tree was in the deep forest, possibly in a place where people had not come before (Krohn 2008, 150). The latter tradition indicates the necessity of a spatial separation between the skull tree and the human sphere. Sometimes the pine tree was even more isolated from the villages, being on a small island in a lake. Such was the case of Karhunpääsaari (Bear's Head Island) in Kangasniemi, in the Finnish region of South Savo (Haavio 1967, 31).

Karelian and Finnish hunters sang that they hung the bear skull on a middle height: On top of the tree, the cold wind could harm the skull, on a low branch, the black ants would eat or ruin it (SKVR I4/1245c, 5–10, Vuonninen, Viena Karelia, Russia, 1888; SKVR XII2/6572, 1834; XII2/6574). This detail indicates that the skull should be well protected.

In Pielisjärvi the hunters sang that the skull was situated nearby a lake full of fish: "I put [it] on the oldest of the pines, / by its side a shore of whitefish, / beside it, a salmon fishery; / by your side the whitefish swim, / beside you the salmons spawn" (*Panen puuhun vanhimpaan, / sivullaan siikaranta, / luonahan lohiapaja, / sivullasi siiat uipi, / luonasi lohet kutee*; SKVR VII5/3403, 40–44, Pielisjärvi, North Karelia, Finland, 1838, name of singer not mentioned in the manuscript by Elias Lönnrot). This song is very interesting because the hunters seem to deny that the bear had been killed – the bruin's life was described as continuing in a place rich with fish and food.

Furthermore, people believed that the skull and its pine continued to be powerful and dangerous many years after the skull ritual. In Kangasniemi (South Savo, Finland) it was believed that a man who dared to hit a bear skull pine with an axe would go crazy (Haavio 1967, 31). Haavio noted that it was prohibited to touch the skull or take it away from the tree (Haavio 1967, 32). People interested in ruining a bear skull tree could be other hunters, which were jealous or envious of the success of the bear killers.

In Finno-Karelian folklore, the competition between hunters was generally hard. Antti Huttunen of Iisalmi sang curses against those who would dare to remove a skull: "Twist his head, / wind his nose aside!" (*Väännä päätä väärällehen, / nokka syrjähän syseä!*; SKVR VI2/4920, 5–8, Iisalmi, North Savo, Finland, 1876, Antti Huttunen). Another singer from Iisalmi sang a similar curse: "Wrench his hand into a hook" (*Kättä koukkuun kokkoo*; SKVR VI2/7407 a, 29, Iisalmi, North Savo, Finland, 19th century, year and singer unknown, manuscript by Kaarle Krohn). We can suppose that a dreadful spiritual force remained present and vigilant on the spot, protecting the tree and the skull against other hunters who dared to fell or ruin them.

Several songs suggest that this ritual return of the bear skull and soul to the forest and the sacred pine was a prelude of its regeneration. The songs performed at the beginning of the procession of the bear skull ritual included a description of the boundary between the profane village and the sacred forest. The Savonian singer Antti Huttunen exhorted the bear to wander "along that golden alley, / a silver street, / in a golden cup, / in a copper basket, / across the hill of Pohjola" (*Tätä kultaista kujoa, / hopeaista tietä myöten, / kultaisessa kuppisessa, / vaskisessa vakkasessa, / poikki Pohjolan mäkien*; SKVR VI2/4919, 5–9 Iisalmi, North Savo, Finland, 1876). By passing over that hill, being carried in a newborn's basket (*vakka*), the bruin was returned to the mythical land of its birth (Pohjola, or Pohja, the Northland). The reference to the gold and silver alleys and streets indicate that the place is very uncommon and mythical. At the beginning of the bear hunt, the North Karelian hunter Honkanen sang that the bear was born "in the dark Pohjola, / in the rigorous Tapiola" (*Pimeessä Pohjolassa, / tarkassa Tapiolassa*; SKVR VII5/3386: 2–3, Kivilahti, Kauvonniemi, Ilomantsi, North Karelia, Finland, 1885, T. Honkanen). In Nurmes the hunters sang that the bear was born "in the honeyed Mehtola" (*Metisessä Mehtolassa*; SKVR VII5/3385, 9, Nurmes, North Karelia, Finland, 1832, name of

singer not mentioned in the manuscript by Elias Lönnrot). In hunting songs, when Pohjola, Tapiola and Metsola/Mehtola were combined through parallelism, they were names for an otherworldly forest (Franssila 1900, 383; Karhu 1947, 115).

The forestland where the bear was born was not a natural place in the modern sense; it was a mythic environment inhabited by supernatural beings, the *haltias* (guardian spirits) of the forest. In the *The Birth of the Bear* incantations sung by hunters, the bruin is often born under a small pine (or a spruce, another evergreen tree), or on its roots (SKVR VI2/4886, 13; Piludu 2019, 114–120). The hunters sang that the bear was born "under a small pine" (SKVR VI2/4886) or that Mielikki, the Mistress of the forest, conceived the bear "under the spruce's flower-top" (SKVR XII2/6480, 30–36). The hunters gave back the bear's skull and bones, setting them in the exact places where the bruin was born. In different *Bear Songs* the names of the bear's mothers and protectors varied; the most common ones are Mielikki, Hongotar, the Crone or Mistress of Pohjola (Pohja), the Mistress of the forest.

One of the typical female *haltias* protecting the bear was Hongotar, the "Pine Lady" (Piludu 2019, 120–121), and perhaps the hunters gave back the bear's bones to this spirit by hanging the bear skull on a pine tree. The hunters seemed to send the bear's bones back to their birth land, so that they were in place for the regeneration of the animal. Haavio considered Hongotar (also Hongatar, Honkatar, Hongas) to be the original mother of the bear, because her name relates to the pine tree (*honka*) where the bear skull was hung (Haavio 1967, 25). She is mentioned in some of the oldest *Bear Songs* – the *Cantio Ursina* (SKVR IX4/1101, 6, Rautalampi, North Savo, Finland, 1675, anonymous singer) and the *Text of Viitasaari* (after 1750). In the latter, the hunter sang to the bear: "Your family is of the pine grove, / Hongotar is of your family" (*Hongincosta sinun sucusi / Hongotar sinun sugusi*; SKVR IX4/1096, 37–38, Viitasaari, central Finland). In a *The Birth of the Bear* incantation from Kuusamo, the bruin was born "from the den of Petäjätär (the Pine Lady), / the room of Hongatar (the Pine Lady)" (*Petäjättären pesästä, / hongattaren huonehesta*; SKVR XII2/6867, 3–4, Kuusamo, North Ostrobothnia, Finland). This idea could be related to an actual situation: Bears often build their den in digging a hole nearby the roots of a pine or under spruce or pine branches, and she-bears often give birth in their dens. Maybe the songs added a mythical dimension to a natural phenomenon, defining the den as the dwelling place of the forest spirit and that spirit as the mythic mother of the bear.

Martti Haavio considered Hongotar a personification of the pine tree, where the first bear skull was hung (Havio 1967, 25–26). However, this interpretation seems to be a bit too restricted. In the incantations and *Bear Songs*, Hongotar or Hongatar was a typical forest spirit, not only the protector of the pine of the bear skulls. She was also supposed to help the humans who respected her performing rituals and honouring her in the songs. The hunters invoked her to guide them towards the bear den. The hunters prayed to Hongatar to carve signs on the trees to mark the place where the den or the bear could be found (SKVR VII5/3312, 4–10; VII5/3313, 7–12). The cattle herders often invoked Hongatar in incantations to protect the cattle from bears during the grazing season (SKVR VI2/5350, 4–6; VI2/5352, 4–6; VII5/3849, 19–23; VII5, Metsäsuomalaiset 314, 1; XII 2/6740, 37–39).

The regeneration of the bear in Karelian and Siberian traditions

A *Bear Song* by the Karelian singer Iivana Malinen[16] demonstrates the presence of vernacular conceptions about the regeneration of the bear in the Karelian tradition: "The crooked-claw of Pohja, / crooked-claw, bone-hunch, / felt about ten claws, / felt ten claws, / on the north side of the river, /

16 Iivana Malinen was the grandson of Ontrei Malinen, one of the most skilled Karelian singers, and the son of Jyrki Malinen. He learned his *Bear Songs* from his grandfather.

on the sunny side of the hill, / on the root of a wrenched young spruce. / Take from there, my *otso* [bruin], / claws to replace your claws, / the best shirt from the bundle, / the most desired of the teeth" (*Pohjan on kyyttö kynsi, / kyyttö kynsi, luu hamura, / vanu kynttä kymmenisen, vanu kynttä kymmenkunnan, / pohjois-puolella jokea, / päivän-puolella mäkeä, / juuressa nyry-närehen. / Ota sieltä otsoseni, / kynsiä kynsien sijahan, / paita pakasta parahin, haluisimmat hampahista*; SKVR I4/1244 e, 1–11, Vuonninen, Viena Karelia, Russia).

These lines were sung after the skinning of the bear, not during the skull rituals. However, the text is probably the most precise Finno-Karelian description of how a dead bear would be able to regenerate himself. "Crooked-claw" and "bone-hunch" were epithets for the Crone of Pohja or the Mistress of Pohjola (SKVR I1/90, 1; I4/1112, 3–4; I4/1413, 1–2), who felted new claws in Pohjola "on the root of a young spruce". In Iivana Malinen's *The Birth of the Bear* incantation, the Crone of Pohjola was the mother of the bear.[17] She gave birth to the bear "on the root of a wrenched young spruce" (SKVR I4/1191, 12; Piludu 2019, 129–136). Thus, the regeneration of the bear happened at the same spot where the bruin had been born, and it seems that it was put in motion by the mother of the bear. The killed bruin was requested to reach back to its birthplace and take new claws, teeth and the best "shirt," probably a new fur.

The word "rebirth" was never mentioned in the song of Iivana Malinen, who, like all the Finno-Karelian hunters, sang about the death of the bear as little as possible. The procedure in which the bear was involved seemed rather a regeneration, an "exchange" of body parts or the healing of them, than a resurrection. In Iivana's song, the killed bruin is described as a living being able to travel back to the land of its birth. Malinen apparently sang about partial regenerations: new claws for old claws, new teeth for old teeth. However, the claws and the teeth of the bear in the Finno-Karelian tradition represented the force of the whole animal; they were often preserved by hunters and used as protective amulets in many rituals (Piludu 2019, 260–262). By taking new claws and teeth from Pohjola, the force of the bear was fully restored. They were "hard" body parts and the "weapons" of the bear; like swords or knives, they could be "changed". In hunting rituals, the regeneration of animals was believed to start from hard body parts, like claws, teeth, bones, or skulls, not from meat or other organs that decomposed.

The folklorist Matti Kuusi considered the bear skull ritual as directly connected to the idea of regeneration from the bones: "The bones were given back to the forest mistress or a divine being living near the copper mountain or the sky mountain, who was able to make with them the building material of the new bears" (Kuusi 1963, 49). Kuusi made a hypothetical reconstruction, but his theory seems to be based on Iivana Malinen's songs.

The ethnologist Ivar Paulson[18] stated that northern Eurasian peoples ritually preserved the bones of bears, reindeer, elk, deer, foxes, hares, sables, wolves, lynxes, wolverines, walruses, seals, swordfish, and various species of birds and fish. Paulson added that scholars collected more ethnographic data about the preservation of bear bones, "but the rituals performed with them are not fundamen-

17 The anthropologist Matti Sarmela stated that the myth of the bear's birth from the Mistress of Pohjola was a depravation of the ancient *The Birth of the Bear in the Sky*. Sarmela describes the Mistress of Pohjola as the incarnation of evil, as she is also defined as a "whore" and the mother of illnesses in healing incantations. In his theory, this *Birth of the Bear* was the product of an agrarian society that fully demonised the bear, as it could kill the cattle in the grazing season. I am not fully convinced by his interpretation. It is correct that the Mistress of Pohjola was a dangerous being, and she was dreadful in Iivana Malinen's *The Birth of the Bear*, too. However, she was not fully evil, but very ambiguous, able to damage or save people and animals. The herders could invoke her to protect the cattle, and she was able to regenerate bears. Her role in the folk beliefs was not only destructive, but also generative and protective.

18 Ivar Paulson (1922–1966) was an Estonian ethnologist and scholar of Siberian and Finnic religions. He worked in Hamburg and Stockholm and published intensively in German. He was particularly interested in the problem of rituals about regeneration of game animals from their bones.

tally different from those where other animal bones were involved" (Paulson 1968, 451). Among the Mistassini Cree (Canada) hunters, the inedible parts of game animals have "intrinsic power" (Tanner 1979, 141).

The main difference is that among the Finno-Karelians, the Sámi (Fennoscandia), the Mansi (Western Siberia), the Khanty (Western Siberia), the Nivkhi (Eastern Siberia and Sakhalin Island), the Ainu (Japan) or the Cree (Canada), the skull ritual was an integral part of the bear ceremonials and feast. In the circumboreal area, however, the hunting of big sea mammals (whales, walruses, and seals), elk or great quantities of salmon included feasts and ceremonials, too (Lantis 1938; Fienup-Riordan 1994, 88–142; Watanabe 1994). Watanabe identifies ceremonials as "sending-off" rituals, performed before the animal spirits entered the village as guests of honour of the festival and then afterwards, when they were sent back to their environments, to ensure that they would reappear the next hunting or fishing season (Watanabe 1994, 67; Wiget/Balalaeva 2011, 139–140).

Paulson stressed that the general concept of the revival of the bones can be found in many Eurasian traditions, but the hunters themselves "think rather of the animal's continued existence than a resurrection in the proper sense of the word" (Paulson 1968, 455). I will dare to suppose that the scholarly obsession with discussing the resurrection of the animals could also be influenced by the Christian background of several scholars. Resurrection is a concept influenced by centuries of Christian theology, and it implies that the animal experienced a socially recognised death. The problem here is that the bear's death was almost negated during the rituals, and it was transformed into the visit of a guest of honour to the village.

Scholars have made clear statements about the resurrection of animals from bones, but the hunters tried to avoid speaking about the issue. The ethnologist Eveline Lot-Falck[19] stated that the Siberian hunters did not offer clear explanations about the destiny of the animal: "What happened to the animals killed during the hunt? The animal came, it left, so it will come back. Where does it go? How will it come back? No clarification about that. Certainly, in our times, if the word death is pronounced, it is to continue the fictional tale of the voluntary visit" (Lot-Falck 1961, 211). Lot-Falck stressed that Siberian hunters had a different conception of death, compared to the modern one: "Death is not a break. It does not have an irrevocable nature, and it remains a transitory state. A passage between one world to another often leaves the possibility of a return, so the absence of the soul could be temporary" (Lot-Falk 1961, 211). This statement fits well with the Finno-Karelian folk beliefs, in which the death of the bear did not signify the complete absence of life and the dissolution of the bruin's self, but involved the bruin's immediate and voluntary participation in the bear feast (Piludu 2019, 216–224) and the regeneration and continuation of the bear's life after the skull ritual.

Both the Finno-Karelians and Siberians did not appreciate anyone speaking or singing about the kill or the resurrection of the game animals. Siberian hunters had similar beliefs about the necessity of avoiding mention of the bear's death or rebirth. The Ainu (Japan) did not say to the bear that it had been killed, but that it was being "sent away" to its relatives in the mountains (Zolotarev 1937, 123; Batchelor 1901, 206–207).

The Tungusic Orochs (self-designation: Nani; eastern Siberia and Sakhalin Island) people said to the killed bear: "Go fast, go to your masters, put on a new fur, and come back the next year so that I may look at you" (Shternberg 1933, 439; Zolotarev 1937, 123). Lot-Falck stated that the Siberians believed that life continued to inhabit the bones, in different parts of the skeleton, which, at a certain point, could cover itself again with flesh. Life remained and was always potentially present in ritually

19 Eveline Lot-Falck (1918–1974) was a French ethnologist, professor of religions of North Asia and an expert at the Asian Department of the Musée del'Homme of Paris.

preserved bones. As every part potentially represented the whole, a single but powerful bone – such as the skull – was able to generate an entire new body (Lot-Falk 1961, 212).

In the Finno-Karelian and Oroch traditions, the hunters refrained from speaking about the bear's death and resurrection; they instead presented the bear's destiny as a travel back to its birth land for the acquisition of new body parts (fur, teeth, claws). They emphasised the positivity of this bodily regeneration, glossing over the violent death.[20]

The bear's testimony about its treatment

Can we find in Finland or Karelia some accounts of the continuation of the bear's life after its death? In Suomussalmi (Kainuu, Finland) the travel of the bear did not end in the branches of the pine. After the skull ritual, the hunter exhorted the bear to go to Mehtola (Metsola, the Forestland), the land of the forest *haltias* (guardian spirits), to tell that it had been kindly treated during the feast and the skull ritual: "Tell, after having left from here, / after having gone to Mehtola[:] / ["]Here I was not treated badly, / they fed me with mead, / they let me drink honey-drinks.["] (*Sano täältä saatuasi, / mehtolahan mentyäsi: / ei täällä pahoin pietty, / simoa täällä syötettihin, / mesijuomat juotettihin*; SKVR XII2/6572, 11–15, Kylmäsalmi, Suomussalmi, Kainuu, Finland, 1834, name of singer not mentioned in the manuscript by Elias Lönnrot).

According to Kaarle Krohn, the bear that came back to the mythical forestland (Metsola, Mehtola) would persuade other bears to participate in similar feasts in the village (Krohn 2008, 157). The bear probably told them and the forest spirits about the nice treatment in the human village during the bear feast[21] (Piludu 2019, 231–239) and the bear skull rituals. The song is interesting because it reveals that the bear was believed to be able to speak, and the speaking ability is a typical attribute of personhood.

In Finland and Karelia, the alcoholic drinks offered to the bear during the bear feast and the ritual of the bear skull acquired special importance: The bear was seen as being treated well because the hunters offered mead, ale and barley spirits (*paloviina*, a kind of Finnish *vodka* made of barley, *brännvin* in Swedish). At the end of the bear ceremonial, the hunters drank ale from the nostrils of the bear skull. In the 20th century, some informants still remembered that in the past people drank from the skull. In 1912, the informant Mikko Laitinen told that: "When a bear was killed, it was brought to the roots of a sacred tree, where the funerals were held. For this reason, ale was made, and it was drunk from the holes of the nostrils of the skull of the bear" (SKS KRA Oskari Nousiainen 85, 1912, Kangasniemi, Ohensalo, South Savo, Finland, Mikko Laitinen).[22]

The ritual of drinking from the skull is mentioned in old sources on Finnish bear ceremonialism, the *Text of Viitasari* (SKVR IX4/1096, after 1750; Pentikäinen 2007, 74; Piludu 2019, 267–271) and *Historisk och œconomisk beskrifning öfver Calajoki sock uti Österbotn* (1754) by Christian Salmenius[23] (Haavio 1967, 16). The oldest description of the ritual of drinking from the bear skull was in-

20 In Karelia, also human death was not a complete break from life. In the graveyards, the wooden grave markers were carved in a form resembling a house, and on the Day of the Dead, the people offered food and drinks to the souls of the deceased. This tradition is still alive in rural orthodox Karelia and Russia.

21 During the bear feast, the hunters offered the bear ale and barley spirits; see Piludu, this volume, on the Finno-Karelian bear feast and wedding.

22 The sources from the SKS KRA (Archive of Folk Poetry of the Finnish Literature Society) are mentioned indicating: the name of the collector; the number of his manuscript and its year; the village and its parish; the name of the informant and, sometimes, some basic information about him (age and profession).

23 Christian Salmenius (1700–1791) was a Protestant pastor of Lapua. He was interested in local history and wrote about the topic.

cluded in the sermon given by Bishop of Finland Isak Rothovius[24] for the inauguration of Academia Åboensis (Åbo or Turku[25], Finland, July 15, 1640): "When they catch a bear, a party is held in the dark, and they drink a toast for the bear out of its skull, and groan just as the bear does. Thus, would they gain a greater good fortune!" (Pentikäinen 2007, 131; 2014, 429; Siikala 2016, 380).

In the skull rite, the ale acted as an instrument to have a direct, physical connection with the bear skull and bear force. The ale was offered to the bear, but at the same time the hunter also drank it; it was a shared drinking. By offering ale to the bear skull, its soul was pleased, and it happily transmigrated to the sky or its protecting spirits, waiting for its regeneration (Apo 2001, 74). The ale passed through the skull, a powerful container of bear force, and ended up in the mouth, stomach, and veins of the hunter.

The story of the bear's testimony about its treatment is present also in other Northern indigenous cultures. Ivar Paulson stated that among the Sámi, Khanty, Nivkh, and Ainu, after the hunters had ritually treated the bear's bones, the bruin was requested to tell other bears about the good treatment and the honours it had received among the humans (Paulson 1965, 12). Sometimes the bear was supposed to tell other bears to let themselves be caught by the hunters that had treated it so nicely. Lot-Falck stated that Siberian hunters believed that the soul of the killed bear told the other bruins all the ritual procedures used in dealing with its flesh and bones. The animal person, like the human person, was not a unit that could be separated from the group. Thus, an offense to one bear reached the community of the whole animal species, which would then avenge its mistreated member (Lot-Falk 1961, 205).

The Nivkh of Sakhalin Island and the Amur River (eastern Siberia) exhorted the bear's soul to go to the Master of the Forest or the Master of the Mountain (Paulson 1968, 453). The Eastern Cree (Canada) told the bear to go to the Bear Master (*Memekwesiw*) and tell him how nicely the hunters had treated it (Rockwell 1991, 36). Among the Tungusic Olcha (or Ulch, eastern Siberia), the bear was sent back to its relatives, the forest men, or the masters of the mounds, and there it related the details of the ceremonial. If that was arranged properly, the men of the forest would be satisfied, and they would send "happy hunting" to the humans (Zolotarev 1937, 123).

In Finland a correct performance of the bear ceremonialism assured general luck in the hunt. In 1640, as stated above, Isak Rothovius, Bishop of Finland, underscored that the Finns who performed the bear ceremonials believed that a correct ritual gave the hunters good luck in hunting (Haavio 1967, 15; Pentikäinen 2007, 131; 2014, 429; Siikala 2016, 380).

Conclusions: The importance of honouring the bear and its bones

In Finno-Karelian bear ceremonials the destiny of the bear after its death is not precisely described. There were many possibilities surrounding the "posthumous life" of the bear: a) its skull and soul were oriented towards the Plough, following the myth of *The Birth of the Bear* in the Sky; b) the skull was hung on a sacred pine and the bones were buried on its roots, following the myth of *The Birth of the Bear* in a mythical forest; c) the bear was exhorted to go back to one of his mythical birthlands (Pohjola, the Northland) to take new claws and teeth made by its mother, the Crone of Pohjola, d) the bear was requested to go to the mythical forestland (Metsola, Mehtola, Pohjola, Tapiola) to speak about the good treatment and the drinks the humans had offered during the whole ceremonial.

24 Isak Rothovius (1572–1652) was Bishop of Finland and Åbo (Turku) in 1627–1652, a Chancellor of the Academia Åboensis. He was very active for the improvement of teaching in Finland, a land that he considered "barbarian".

25 The old capital of Finland has two names: Åbo in Swedish and Turku in Finnish.

What is certain is that in most of the cases the bear should go back to one of his mythic homelands, or to the exact spot where it was supposed to be born, and that its life "regenerated" or "continued" there. What was relevant for the hunters was not the precise definition of all the phases of its regeneration, but the fact that the bruin and forest spirits understood and remembered how respectfully the "guest" (bear) had been treated during the whole ceremonial, along with its bones in the last phase of the ritual.

The hunters sang the minimum necessary about the death of the bear, giving a brief deluding justification after its kill (Piludu 2019, 200–203), but they sang several lines reminding of all the honours reserved to it. The goal was to avoid the revenge of the bear and forest spirits and to please them, ensuring their favour. The bear ceremonialism reveals a circular vision of animal life: The bear died, but its life continued, thanks to the accuracy of all the rituals.

The most relevant aspect of the whole bear ceremonial was how the bear was treated in all the ritual phases. In the bear feast it was relevant how the bear – presented as a guest of honour and a groom – was invited inside the house of the village. The hunters emphasised that the bruin had a place of honour at the table, and they stressed the abundance of alcoholic drinks offered during the feast (Piludu 2019, 231–239).[26] During the bear skull rituals, the hunters pointed out that the skull was not thrown on the ice, it was hung on a good and sacred tree, it was brought to the place where the bear was born, and it was oriented facing the Plough. The honours reserved to the bear skull were fundamental to achieve the regeneration of the animal and to obtain good luck in the hunt for the future, as the bruin was supposed to tell the forest spirits about its treatment. The proper treatment of the bear throughout the whole ceremonial was the prelude to the return of the satisfied guest and groom in the village and subsequently it ensured a successful bear hunt in the future, followed by yet another joyful feast to please the bruin and the forest spirits.

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26 See Piludu, this volume, on the Finno-Karelian bear feast and wedding.

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Fig. 1. The pine of Timinkylä (Hämeenkyrö, Finland) is a particular karhunkallohonka *– a bear skull pine tree. It is a 400-year-old pine and probably the oldest tree of the region of Pirkanmaa. The hunters hung bear skulls on its branches with coloured stripes. The same tree was also a* uhripuu *(tree for offerings): The local people offered their fields'* primitiae *(first grain or milk of the year) on its roots. Until* c. *1930 people also offered money putting coins in the holes and cracks of the pine. According to Finnish folk beliefs, the* haltia *(guardian spirit) of the tree assured good luck for the cattle and other rural activities if the people performed these offerings. But if the people forgot to perform rituals, the* haltia *took a hard revenge and people could get sick. In the 19th century almost every household in eastern Finland has his own* uhripuu*: The healthier the tree was, the richer and more prosperous was the household. Finally, this pine was also a* parantava puu *(healing tree), as its powerful* haltia *was believed to heal the toothache. Nowadays the tree is protected, it is a local natural attraction, and it has even a personal post box: Visitors can leave written messages describing the feelings they had in front of the huge tree (photo V. M. Piludu, 2019).*



Fig. 2. Bear skull and hunters near a bear trap in Viena Karelia (Russia). Photo taken by I. K. Inha, 1894 (photo Museovirasto [Finnish National Board of Antiquities], Kuopion kulttuurihistoriallinen museo [Museum of Cultural History of Kuopio]: KHMKUVV 243:44, public domain).



Fig. 3. A bear skull on a birch tree in Inari (Lapland, Sámi village, Finland). Generally, the bear skull was hung on a pine tree or a spruce in Finland (photo S. Paulaharju, 1914, Museovirasto [Finnish National Board of Antiquities], Kansatieteen kuvakokoelma [Ethnologic Photographic Archive]: KK3490:1797, public domain).



Fig. 4. "Bear", photo by Susanna Lendiera, 2018. Many rituals of the Finno-Karelian bear ceremonies focused on the head and skull, which was considered the most powerful part of the bruin. The head and the skull contained the soul of the bear. During the bear feast, all the meat and the organs (eyes, ears, tongue) of the head were ritually eaten by the hunters. Doing so, they believed to obtain the supernatural senses and skills of the bear, as the ability of singing a "kindred song", a song in a shared language, which was understood by bears, humans and haltias *(guardian spirits). The preservation of the skull on the branches of the sacred pine ensured the regeneration of the bear from its skull and bones and the possible return of the bruin as a prey. Rituals for the regeneration of the animal avoided the revenge of bears and pleased the* haltias.