

A DAUR MYTH ABOUT THE BEAR AND THE BOY WHO BECOMES A MAN

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Henry Schwarz's survey, "The Daur of China: an Outline," is one of the few accounts of this people in English.¹ The present article aims to contribute to the ethnography of the Daur by exploring the cultural significance of a contemporary myth about the bear. The story, when seen in the light of other Daur folk literature, suggests that the bear appears rhetorically as a mirror for human qualities and concepts of gender. Daur bear stories suggest that ideas of "male" and "female" may be based on different principles. From the point of view of the male child this results in the presentation of alternative types of self-identity and the possibility of different principles of action.

In view of the evaluations of gender which emerge in this myth it is probably significant that it was told to me by an old Daur woman. She volunteered this story when I was asking about various animals prominent in Daur shamanist symbolism. We had talked of turtles and frogs, about which there were a few desultory remarks, but then my respondent's eyes lit up. "Bear," she said, "I do have an important story about the bear." This conversation took place in 1988, in the presence of some other Daur women, in the village of Tengke (also called Holdi), Molidawa (Morin Dawaa) district, Inner Mongolia. Urgunge Onon kindly helped me to translate the tape-recording of the story from the Daur language.

The Daur of this region live in villages strung along the great Nonni (Naun, Nen-chiang) River, which flows southward through the region formerly known in the west as Manchuria. Their fields and pastures lie in the broad valley plain, which merges at its edges with great tracts of forest, which are still used for hunting. The Daur are

¹ Henry G. Schwarz, "The Daur of China: An Outline," *Zentralasiatische Studien*, 17 (1984): 154-71.

divided into several large, patrilineal and exogamous clans. Although they have been subject to many recent innovations--Marxism, modern education, the influx of Chinese settlers and urbanization, to name but a few, the Nonni River Daurs have maintained certain aspects of clan society, including respect for seniority, and many still regard marriage inside the clan as unforgivable. Villages are associated with sections of clans and the women who have married into a clan-village therefore come from other clans.

The teller of this story was a dignified old lady, to whom all the people accompanying me, including a Party official, had offered the traditional deep bow upon entering the room. Sitting on the warmed brick bed and drinking tea, the old woman began, "There was a fully formed 'old man' [*neg buteesen eterkeen*]." Another woman turned and whispered to me, "The word 'eterkeen' means bear, you know."² The old lady stopped her with an imperious wave of her long pipe, and she started the tale:

This is the story. There was a boy, seven years old, and his father died and they buried him. After the burial the wife put the child on her lap, and then she started to cry. The son asked her, "What are you crying for, what are you thinking of, mother?" She said, "Your father died. I am crying because [I am wondering] how we shall make our living." The son said, "Don't worry about that." The mother stopped crying and they went home and the seven-year-old boy slept.

Suddenly at midnight he got up and took with him a sack and went. "Let me go and steal silver from a rich man." On the way he met a young girl, and he asked her, "Where are you going?" She replied, "Where are you going?"

"I am going to steal a rich man's silver."

"I am doing the same thing--I also want to steal his silver."

"In that case, we both go."

They went, and reached the wall [of the rich man's homestead] and all the doors were locked. "How do we go in?" asked the girl.

² *Eterkeen* is a word of Manchu origin meaning "old man." It is used as a respectful term for the bear, to avoid using the ordinary term *baboge* (>Mong. *baavgai*) which might annoy the creature. According to Urgunge, when referring to the bear the Daurs commonly add the adjective *xar* ("black") and this explains why the bear is called both *eterkeen* and "black man" in the myth.

"You put me in the sack and slowly lower me down."

She put him in the sack, tied up the neck, and used a rope to lower him down. Reaching the ground, he untied the opening, crawled out and found the silver, piled as high as a mountain. There were two guards drinking liquor. When the boy started to put the silver in the sack it made a "katar, katar" sound, and one guard said, "Hey, pal, it sounds as if someone is stealing our silver."

"Oh no, that noise is something else, it's a 'chick-chak' sound like mice."

The boy put twelve silvers in the sack. He got in, tied up the rope, and she pulled him over the wall. She put the sack on her shoulders and ran. Arriving at a fork in the road, she opened the sack and out he jumped. The girl asked, "How many silvers did you put in?"

"Twelve. How many do you want?"

"Only two. That would be all right with me."

He gave her two and took ten. Then he startled her by yelling, "Someone is stealing your silver!" She was terrified, dropped her silver, and ran away. So he picked up all twelve of the silver pieces and carried them home.

The next day he used the silver to buy all necessities. His mother said, "Where did you get all that money?" No answer. The next night he went out to steal the rich man's gold, just as before, while his mother was sleeping.

When he arrived at the gate he saw something very black, an object close to the wall, a fat, wide (*buduun*), black person. The door was locked. But when the black man (*xar küü*) just pointed at it, it opened wide. That day the rich family had taken a bride and put her in the inner room. The two went further inside and arrived at the inner room. They opened the door. The bride was scared at the sight of the black man and leapt to her feet. The black man remorselessly padded over to the kang, tore open the bride's chest and took out her heart (*zürx*) and liver (*heleg*), and put them in a wooden bucket. Then they went out of the gate. The boy was still following him.

Woman: "Who did the black man kill?"

Old women: "The new bride, of course!" She continued:

They went on and arrived at a fallen tree log, where there was a big hole. The black man entered the hole. The boy put a mark by the cave and went back home.

The bride's family found out that she was dead and her heart and liver gone. Many people, many cousins gathered. They went to court. The officials arrested all of the rich man's family and put them in jail. They asked "How come you took my daughter and tore out her heart and liver?" The presiding judge asked, "Why did all of you dig out the heart and liver of this girl whom you had just taken into your house?"

The answer was: "We were happy to have a bride! How could we take out her heart?"

The judge was very angry and he didn't know what to do. His wife advised him to go to the diviner to solve his problem and take advice. He invited the master-diviner, who was his friend. Asked him over and gave him food and drink. The master divined and said, "How could these persons kill their own bride? There must be someone else. A killer." The diviner added, "I will get some more information about this," and he went out and arrived at the back of the boy's house.

At this moment, the boy was just telling his mother through the open window what had happened. "One day I went to the rich man's house, I saw the gate was shut, and there was a pole, I leaned against the pole and suddenly a black man appeared. He used his finger to point at the door and it opened. He grabbed the bride's heart and liver, took them away and I followed. He went into a cave." The mother heard the whole thing. Then the boy discovered someone was listening and ran after him.

"What have you heard under my window? I'll kill you with my sword. You are insulting my widowed mother," he said to the man. The diviner was scared. Why was this boy behaving so unreasonably?

"I am seeking information about someone who took the bride's heart and liver," he replied.

"If that is what you are doing, then let us become blood-brothers. You come in and kow-tow to my mother and call her ewee (mummy)," said the boy. He dragged the diviner into the house, and looking at him carefully, it turned out he was a young man. This young man bowed to the mother and called her ewee. At that point the boy wanted to go, and the mother told the young man to follow.

They went out together to the presiding judge and said: "We two have become sworn brothers, and we would like to be brothers (*axduu*) with you too." So the three of them became sworn brothers.

"I will capture this black man for you," said the boy. "But there is one condition. I must have the short underpants (*üşken xakuur*) of that bride.³ Only if you give me that will I go." So the judge said to the family, "You will have to take them off the dead bride." The family people said, "Well, never mind, we'll take them off." They took off her underclothes and gave them to the boy. The boy put them on and then put his sword in the front of his gown. And he took the two images of land gods [?] with him (Ch. *tudiye*), went, and arrived at the cave.⁴ He left the two holy objects (*tudiye*) sitting on each side of the mouth of the cave.

That boy went down into the deep cave in a basket (*kwanz*), leaving the objects behind. At the bottom of the cave he got out of the basket, walked along, and arrived at a place where there was a small river. He saw a woman washing clothes at the bank. When she saw him she thought he was handsome and said, "You are so young, why are you going this way? If you go this way the evil beast (*muu göröös*) will eat you up. That will be very wasteful. What a pity that will be!"

"Never mind, don't worry about me."

"You shouldn't go further."

"If I die, I should die."

"That beast has just brought down someone's heart and liver, so its clothes become bloody and now I am washing the beast's clothes."

But the boy insisted on going further. He arrived at the outer walls of a city. He stood outside the gates and yelled, "You black man, give back the heart and liver which you raked out from a

³ This is a special kind of short underpants used by menstruating women. In Daur eyes, nothing more polluting could be imagined. In Daur (and in Mongolian) culture, such polluted things also have power, especially to repel and annihilate evil spirits.

⁴ *Tudiye* is used colloquially as "grandfather," but it is often used in its literal meaning for local land gods. The reason for the appearance of local land gods (*tudiye*) at this stage in the story is not clear. Urgunge suggests that they may refer to the boy's companions, the judge and the diviner. In any case, their role resembles that of shamanic helper spirits, aiding the shaman in his or her journey to the "other world."

human person. If you don't give them back I'll kill you with this precious sword (Ch. *baojian*)!"

The black man, lying in the inner room of his house, heard this voice and thought, "This precious sword can cut down any fully formed evil spirit (*büteesen muu shurkul*)."⁵ There was no way out. He had to give up the heart and liver of the bride. He brought out the heart and liver in a basket, and told the boy how to put them back in the bride's body, gave him the medicine, and gave him the necessary instructions about how to bring the bride back to life (*ami garga*). The boy put the basket under his arms, and came back. When he got to the opening, the *tudiye* pulled him up and out by means of the basket and a rope. He went home and told everyone how to put back the heart and liver, saying, "Please use the medicine to make her as she formerly was." But they said, "You do it. This is a woman; we cannot do it. Her parents do not live in this neighborhood." At last they [?the boy ?her parents], following the instructions, managed to make her come alive, and everyone was very happy.⁵

Why were they happy? The boy, on the other hand, said, "I am going to clean out the root (*hujuur*) of the evil."⁶ Taking his sword (*selme*) the boy went out. Going, going, he arrived at the hole. That black one was scared and was just about to move to an island in the ocean when the boy went in and killed the *eterkeen* with his sword. He found that *eterkeen* was a *büteesen eterkeen*. He grabbed all his precious stones (Ch. *baoshi*) and his money purse. He took them all. He came back.

Finished, that's the end of the story.

There are several interesting aspects to this story. The Daur, like other peoples of northern Inner Asia, liken the bear to a human being. The bear is highly respected and called "old man" (Manchu *eterkeen*) or "black man" (Mong.-Daur *xar küü*), rather than *baboge* "bear." The bear, like the tiger, is a master of wild animals (*ejin göröös*), in other words, the ruler of his own realm in the forest. However, the bear makes depredations into the world of humans, just

⁵ This section of the myth was unclear and difficult to translate. The hesitation in curing a woman from another clan is characteristic of quandaries in exogamic clan societies, and if it was the boy who brought her back to life, this is another similarity to the ability of a shaman.

⁶ *Hujuur* literally means the growing spot just above the roots and at the foot of the stem of a plant or tree. The Daur use this word also for "origin" of "cause" and also for male ancestors.

as humans go hunting in the forest. The bear and the hunter are thus both transgressors, each moving in a converse direction to the other.

Hamayon (1990) has pointed out in her seminal study of Siberian shamanism,⁷ that the study of the mythology of North Asia allows further parallels to be drawn. Using mainly Buriat and Evenk materials, Hamayon concludes that the hunter travelling into the wilderness to kill and bring back wild animals is symbolically analogous to the shaman, who journeys to the "other world" to rescue the souls of people captured by evil spirits. Furthermore, both the hunter and the shaman are analogous to the epic hero who seeks a bride. Travelling to the wife-giver's place, the hero is set life-threatening tasks by the bride's father. He must successfully complete these before he can win her. Hamayon explores this set of relationships in terms of a putative exchange between "this world" and "the other world," mediated by the shaman. Our story also establishes a series of dualistic worlds to be penetrated by the hero, and the theme of the descent through the bear's cave is strongly reminiscent of the shaman's journey to the "other world."

However, the myth can also be seen not so much as positing a synchronic, structural opposition, than as making a symbolic statement about changing human relationships in time. At one level this is a matter of narrative interest, of attracting the attention of the audience by the idea of the daring, cocky little boy who is ready for any undertaking and in the process of succeeding in that undertaking grows up. At another level, if we look at the boy's trajectory in relation to the cultural-social categories involved, it may be possible to perceive a temporary rejection by the young men of characteristically male gender activity, and a revaluing of female power associated with the mother.

The bear in our story is not just a bear; it becomes clear that the bear is also an evil spirit and that it lives in an underground realm similar to the "other world" of shamanism. The bear thus represents alien and dangerous male otherness. Perhaps a further interpretation is possible in the present story: given the death of the boy's father, the origin of evil spirits in deceased ancestors, and taking into account another well-known Daur myth, I suggest that the bear may stand not only for maleness in general, but indirectly also for the (deceased) father. Consider the following story, known among both the Daur and the Tungus peoples of Manchuria.

⁷ Roberte Hamayon, *La chasse à l'âme. Esquisse d'une théorie du chamanisme sibérien* (Société d'ethnologie, Nanterre, 1990).

A long time ago a very old woman and her daughter went into the deep forest to get wood for their fire. Suddenly a black bear came out of the forest, seized the daughter, and made her into his wife. Later the daughter produced a boy. When the boy grew up he went hunting with his father. The boy's strength was as great as his father's and he was even braver than the bear. He found out that the appearance of his father and mother was different. He asked his mother why. She told him the reason. The boy killed his father the bear and took his mother back to her home. So the Daur and Tungus worship the bear.⁸

In this story the boy clearly identifies with his mother, who stands for humanity, as against the bear-father who is destined to be overthrown. The bear is worshipped by the Daur, as a patrilineal ancestor-spirit, as a propitiation and to avert his anger. Both here, and in the Daur story told to me by the old woman in Tengke, the bear is the stealer, oppressor and/or destroyer of women. In the Tengke story, the boy-hero initially seems set in this mold, too, since he establishes himself at the beginning of the story as a thief and as a cheat in his relations to the little girl. Male actions thus appear successful but morally dubious ("Where did you get all that money?" asks the mother, and there was no reply).

In this context it is worth examining the expression *büteesen eterkeen*, as used in the story. *Bütee* is a verb meaning "to accomplish" or "to achieve," and Urgunge Onon explained to me that one can acquire a social status by birth, or alternatively by one's actions. *Büteesen eterkeen* means a person who achieved the status of "old man" by his achievements. The repetition and placing of the expression *büteesen eterkeen* in the myth suggests that it is not just a contingent phrase but rather a cultural model, denoting a concept of completed maleness, or male gender, which is achieved through action. The myth does not seem simply to be saying, "let us dignify bears by calling them by a respectable human term." Rather, it is as if the myth exemplifies the idea of male gender by means of the bear: this is what the *büteesen eterkeen* is like.

Now in the course of his trajectory of actions, the boy later comes to identify with and act on behalf of women. In the Tengke myth, having first gone along with the bear in the marauding expedition into the rich man's house, the boy then changes course in order to rescue the bride. At this moment, the foundering social institutions of

⁸ Personal communication from Tsui Yen-hu, who heard this story from a Daur friend.

law and religion (the judge and the master-diviner) are brought under control and aligned by the boy. He forces the judge and the diviner to submit to his mother, making them her "sons" like himself and establishing the mother as the moral origin of subsequent actions. He then arms himself not only with a male weapon, the sword, but with the magical power of women's pollution (the underpants). This pollution is associated with another clan, the "wife-givers," since brides in principle must come from outside the groom's clan. At this point in the story, however, female pollution is recognized only positively, as conferring invulnerability and as confounding the bear's force. The boy identifies himself with this power, and this perhaps is not unconnected with the prepubertal status of the boy-hero which allows him to undertake an action dangerous to ordinary adult males. Wearing this garment, the hero is able to penetrate the underworld unscathed, frighten the bear with his sword, and rescue the girl.

Another regional myth may be illuminating in order to better understand the indexical relation between the child and the female parent (and thereby to understand at least one cultural concept of female gender):

A long time ago a hunter out in the forest was seized by a female bear. She imprisoned the hunter in a cave. They lived together like husband and wife. Later the bear produced a baby bear. One day the mother bear went out with the baby to gather food and they forgot to close the cave. The hunter escaped. When he reached the river bank he jumped on a log and floated down. At dusk the mother bear and baby came back with the food. As soon as she saw the open cave she knew something terrible had happened. She went in and the hunter was gone. She was in anguish. Taking the baby, she followed his tracks to the river-bank. They ran along the bank and saw the hunter perched on his log. The female bear waved her two front paws, trying to persuade him to come back, but the hunter did not look at her. She was so anxious and angry. She wanted to jump on the log, but the river was too wide. She was so beside herself she caught the baby bear and tore it in two. She threw one part to the hunter, and she herself embraced the other half, in tears. So these two parts of the baby bear lived in two places, with their father and mother respectively. The mother's half was a bear. The father's half was the ancestor of the Orunchen, the Evenk and the Daur.⁹

⁹ Tsui Yen-hu, personal communication.

In this story, since the bear is the mother, the child is bear-like, whereas in the previous myth, when the bear is the father, the child still looks human. In other words, these bear stories both show the child as having the physical identity of the mother, not the father. We can perhaps go further and say that this (and perhaps female gender itself) is seen, at least by male Daur, as an inevitable fact, not something accomplished by deeds. On this view, the characteristics of the female bear--her possessiveness, nurturing nature, and emotionality--would appear as results flowing from femaleness rather than as qualifications for that status.¹⁰

The bald fact of likeness between child and mother in these myths goes against the ideology of the patrilineal clan and against the theory, also held by the Daur, that the father is responsible for the physical and mental nature of the child, the mother being only a vessel. Something of this conflict of ideas is evident in the above myth. As in the Tengke story, the bear appears as the mirror of certain gender propensities. The child is literally torn between its dissimilar parents--like the Daur child between its mother's and father's clans--and it acquires identity only through the mother's act of violence. Its own relationship with femininity is essentially passive.

In the Tengke myth, however, the boy-hero is internally impelled to action. Having first taken the risky, courageous and immoral path of the male, he then acknowledges his alignment with the mother and turns against the bear. At this point social forces stand with the mother too, and the bear (adult male) represents alien alterity. From here on, the boy acts not secretly by night, but openly and autonomously. Now the bear is forced to do the decent thing: it hands over the vital organs and medicines and instructions for re-creating life. Everyone is happy. But the boy is not. Here we can see the third stage of the myth and of the boy-hero's development. Now acting entirely on his own, the boy goes marauding back into the realm of the bear, steals

¹⁰ Daur attribute such emotions to real female bears. Furthermore, there was a general supposition that female bears discriminate among their cubs according to their color. Urgunge describes his uncle as saying, "The Black Old Man is a most cruel beast who will always give a slow death to human beings. But his female loves her babies tenderly. And she is especially fond of those of her cubs that have white necks. Once I found three black babies dead in a cave, lying under logs. This meant that the mother had put logs on top of the black cubs to hold them still until she and her beloved white-necked babies had eaten first. But by then it was too late for the black ones; the weight of the logs had killed them," Onon, (MSS) *Smoke from the Yurt*.

its treasures and kills it too. It would be incorrect to say that we have come full circle, but certainly there is a sense of the succession of a new generation.

All three of these bear stories use the likeness to and difference from the bear of the human-being to explore concepts of male and female, inside and outside, moral and immoral, this world and the other world. Bears may always be "outside," but their identification with "maleness" and "femaleness" can go either way. For this reason, it does not seem very useful to see these stories in a synchronic, dualistic way, since they contradict one another. We can make only the general observation of the Tengke myth that the boy-hero, like a shaman, restores life and the security of the status quo. A more significant aspect of the story is its dynamic orientation: the myth recounts a temporal process organized by sequences of action. The interpretation given here is that the boy undertakes actions to become a man and that maleness is repeatedly contrasted with female characteristics. The myth does not spare us from having to take notice of the ruthlessness of this process.