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THE EUROPEAN BEAR'S SON TALE: ITS RECEPTION AND INFLUENCE ON INDIGENOUS ORAL TRADITIONS IN NORTH AMERICA

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Abstract: The primary purpose of this article is to explore the way that the Bear's Son tale, a wide-spread European folktale, came to be incorporated into the oral storytelling traditions of Native Americans. The work is divided into three parts. In the first section the reasons that led me to begin to investigate the European tale are discussed. The second part is dedicated to a discussion of the European tale itself, its plotline and geographical diffusion within Europe and North America. In the third section, I reflect on how and why versions of the European tale came to attract the attention of Native American storytellers, as well as the time frame that might be assigned to the transfer of these oral traditions.

Keywords: ontological turn, new animism, ursine ancestors, Euskara (Basque), French folktales, Native American storytelling traditions, human-animal divide, culture-nature dichotomy, other-than-human persons, Jean de l'Ours

1. INTRODUCTION

This article examines the way that a wide-spread European folktale, often called "The Bear's Son Tale", became incorporated into the storytelling traditions of Native Americans. The work is divided into three parts. In the first part I review the reasons that led me to begin my investigation of the European tale, an effort that has spanned more than four decades. The second part is dedicated to a discussion of the European tale itself, its plotline and geographical diffusion within Europe. In the third section North American versions of the tale are addressed. In doing so, I reflect on how and why versions of the European tale came to attract the attention of the Native storytellers of North America, as well as the time frame that might be assigned to the transfer of oral traditions that took place.

For the past four decades I have explored the ramifications of an archaic belief that I encountered while doing fieldwork among the Basque people in the early 1980s, namely, that Basques used to believe humans descended from bears. Although my informants had alluded to aspects of this belief indirectly, it was not until the late 1980s that a report documenting the belief was published. Up until that time it had been passed down orally from one generation of Basque speakers to the next, who, in the process, were always careful not to share the information with non-Basque speakers. Soon after I discovered the existence of this ursine genealogy, other bits and pieces of ethnographic evidence began to fall into place, among them folktales that speak of a young woman who mates with a bear and gives birth to a child, a half-human, half-bear offspring.

Once the ursine origin of humans was plugged into the interpretive frame of these stories, the adventures of the main character who was half-bear and half-human, took on a new significance. As a result, I began to process other European ethnographic and ethnohistoric data through a different lens, one that was no longer purely anthropocentric in nature, but rather more animist. From this vantage point, the human-animal divide, so typical of Western thought, becomes blurred or dissolves entirely. This interpretive framework challenges the belief in 'human exceptionalism', a topic that has received far more attention from researchers in recent years than in the past (Porr & Matthews 2016; T. Thompson 2019). It has been subsumed into discussions of relational ontologies and categorized as the "new animism" (Bird-David 1999; Harvey 2006).

Figure 1*. The seven provinces of Euskal Herria, the historical Basque Country. Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Basque_Country_(historical_territory).*

Whereas evidence for the belief that bears are ancestors and therefore kin has been well documented among North American and Eurasian indigenous peoples (Berres & Stothers & Mather 2004; Hallowell 1926; Lapham & Waselkow 2020; Rockwell 1991), that such a belief once informed the daily lives and social practices of Europeans had not been contemplated until relatively recently (Bertolotti 1992, 1994; Edsman 1996; Lajoux 1996; Pauvert 2014; Shepard 1999, 2007; Shepard & Sanders 1992). Yet there are many folkloric traces pointing to the veneration of bears, particularly in the Pyrenean region and even more concretely in Euskal Herria, the historical Basque Country (Fig. 1).

It was not until the end of the twentieth century when the Basque anthropologist Txomin Peillen (1986) published his interview with the last two Basque-speaking bear hunters of Zuberoa (Soule) – an elderly father and his son – that we had concrete written evidence of the mindset that accompanied this archaic belief in bear ancestors. There is reason to believe that it had been circulating orally for a long time even though it was never mentioned when talking to non-Basque speakers (Frank 2008b). In that interview, after the tape-recorder had been turned off, Petiri Prébende, the father, started talking about bears, namely, European brown bears (*Ursus arctos*). And when he did, he stated the following: "Lehenagoko eüskaldünek gizona hartzetik jiten zela sinhesten zizien" (Basques used to believe that humans descended from bears). He went on to talk about the power of bear paws and how "the bear had created human beings" (Peillen 1986: 173).

Hence, evidence emanating from the Pyrenean zone, most especially from zones in which Euskara (Basque), a language classed as pre-Indo-European, was once or still is spoken, should be examined with care. Moreover, there is substantial evidence that bears also played a special role in the belief system of Europeans; that the veneration and respect paid to bears may well have been grounded in a similar understanding, one that allowed bears to be viewed as ancestors and kin as well as being attributed supernatural powers (Frank 2008a, 2009; Lajoux 1996; Pastoureau 2011).

2. OVERVIEW OF THE EUROPEAN FOLKTALE

Over the past twenty years I have endeavored to lay out the possible implications of a group of European folktales in which the main protagonist is portrayed as having an ursine genealogy. His father is a bear and his mother a human female. The tale is known as "The Bear's Son" and along with its variants it is probably the most widely disseminated European folktale ever recorded. The

title utilized here, that is, "The Bear's Son", is an informal one, used in conjunction with "John the Bear", to refer to a set of related narratives, categorized formally by folklorists as tale type ATU 301. The Bear's Son is also a term used to refer particularly to versions of the tales that have been compared to northern sagas, such as *Beowulf*. In other instances, the same set of tales is assigned a title that highlights the name of the protagonist in that language: *John the Bear* in English, *Juan el Osito* in Spanish, *Jan de l'Os* in Catalan, *Jan l'Ourset* in Gascon, *Jean de l'Ours* in French, *Giovanni l'Orso* in Italian, *Hans Bär* in German and *Ivanuska* as well as *Ivanko Medvedko* in Slavic languages.

The worldview reflected in the storyline with its half-human, half-bear protagonist has never been the subject of serious investigation. Questions have never been asked concerning the reason that the hero was assigned this genealogy in the beginning. Nor has there been a concerted attempt to study the European tale taking into consideration the hunter-gatherer mentality and animist cosmology implicit in stories found among Native Americans and Siberian groups where bears are considered ancestors and therefore kin. In those tales a woman often marries or mates with a bear and has offspring, a plotline that incorporates not only the concept of an ursine genealogy but also the fluid notion of identity and personhood that regularly goes along with this relational ontology (Barbeau 1946; Rockwell 1991; Shepard & Sanders 1992; Wallace 1949).

Some of the most well-preserved versions of the European tales, including those evidencing the most archaic structural elements and most undisturbed plotline, emanate from former Basque-speaking zones of France and Spain and from the current Basque-speaking region itself. This is the same region, as noted, in which the belief that humans descended from bears continued to circulate well into the twentieth century. Indeed, some of the most remarkable variants of the tale itself have been collected in the westernmost part of Europe, especially in the Pyrenean zone and its immediate environs. This is the same zone where elaborate *fêtes de l'ours* which feature ritualized bear hunts are still celebrated each year (Gastou 1987; Gual 2017; Pauvert 2014; Truffaut 1988, 2010).

Further research concerning this core belief points to the strong possibility that it was once present across much of Europe. Even though explicit references to the ursine genealogy of humans have not been documented in the rest of Europe, there are many cultural practices and beliefs that point to the previous veneration of bears and the belief in bear-ancestors (Frank 2008a, 2008b, 2009; Pastoureau 2011).

When bears are viewed as kin as well as ancestors, a fluidity of being is produced that ruptures the asymmetric dichotomies so firmly entrenched in

SAE (Standard Average European) languages and, hence, our familiar ways of thinking (Whorf 1941). Indeed, two of the most pervasive dichotomies have been the culture vs. nature split and the apparently insurmountable human-animal divide. In contrast, we have the terms used by Hallowell (1960) to describe the concept of personhood in Ojibwe ontology and worldview, that is, "human persons" and "other-than-human persons". The Ojibwe, also referred to as Ojibwa, Saulteaux or Chippewa, are an Anishinaabe people residing in what is currently southern Canada, the northern Midwest of the United States, and the Northern Plains. Their language is a branch of the Algonquian language family (Fig. 2).

Figure 2. *Pre-contact distribution of Algonquian languages. Source: By Noahedits – Own work, CC BY-SA 4.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=84009704.*

The expression "other-than-human persons" calls into question the human exceptionalism associated with Western thought. Moreover, as McNiven has shown:

> *Anthropological theorizing informs us that the human-animal duality of Western thought is limited in scope for most of humanity and most of human history, where the human-animal divide was more commonly seen as ontologically fluid and permeable and understood in terms of overlapping personhood…* (McNiven 2013: 97)

Also, as is well known, although rarely kept in mind, the terms *culture* and *nature* are concepts of recent coinage, each having evolved out of quite different conceptual frames of understanding than those currently associated with them. Indeed, asymmetric polarities, such as that of culture vs. nature, which currently sit at the center of debates on the so-called "ontological turn" in ethnography, anthropology, and archaeology are themselves in need of serious reflection, not simply because of what they stand for today, but also because until recently little attention has been paid to the processes that led to the current discursive instantiation of these polarities in Indo-European languages, and most especially in English (Paleček & Risjord 2013).

In a certain sense, debates focused on the so-called "ontological turn", which have been taking place in some corners, center on a semantically instantiated polarity that evolved out of much earlier philosophical discussions that were taking place during the Middle Ages and Renaissance. The contemporary meanings attached to each member of the culture-nature polarity are often treated unreflectively as if they always had the same meanings assigned to them (Latimer & Miele 2013). Even though they are deeply entrenched in modern philosophical and anthropological conceptual frames of thought, as they currently stand, they are simply the most recent iterations of the meanings assigned to the two words themselves, i.e., culture and nature (Hadyn 1950: 461–554; Lovejoy & Boas 1935; Williams 1978: 11–20, 1980: 67–85).

Speaking of the ontological turn that is sweeping through other disciplines, at the center of the debates is the notion of relational ontologies, a concept that will be brought to bear in the present analysis (Hill 2011). Moreover, it is this attention to relational ontologies that has given strength to the ontological turn that has been taking place in ethnographic, anthropologic, and archaeological circles over the past twenty years, impacting both theory and practice (Rodseth 2015; Swancutt & Mazard 2018; Watts 2013). It is a movement that calls into question the foundational tenets of modernity and that was given impetus initially by Latour's earlier work, *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993).

The new framework can be expressed in two ways. One way is to recognize that other societies, past and present, experience life in different ways, that they have access to different life-worlds. It follows, therefore, that a key to understanding such non-Western societies is to reconstruct their ontologies, for the latter are a fundamental component of their underlying cosmology and, hence, overall worldview (Haber 2009; Nadasdy 2007). A somewhat different approach is to recognize the ontological turn as a theoretical tool that requires us to assume a more reflexive attitude concerning the core beliefs of Western thought, especially the dualisms that are so deeply engrained in that world view, for example, the human-animal divide, the mind-body opposition, and

the stark culture-nature dichotomy. And this requires a major conceptual reorientation that is not easily accomplished since many of these core beliefs are held without reflection. They form the background of unarticulated convictions which the holder may not even recognize are operating.

It has long been recognized that other cultures, past and present, do not necessarily share the same worldview that is dominant in the West. With the ontological turn emphasis is now being placed on understanding such societies by reconstructing the ontological commitments inherent in them, including the concept of animism. That approach also speaks of engaging with indigenous ontological commitments as a legitimate way of reconfiguring Western concepts and social practices. At the same time, however, this approach demands taking up a new position vis-à-vis one's own discipline and belief system. And this in turn requires a more reflexive attitude concerning one's own core beliefs. In 2016, Alberti expressed this conundrum in a kind of third-person neutral manner: "the difference between the two [expressions of the ontological turn] lies in the degree to which an approach is willing to do ontology to itself, how much critique it is willing to direct at its own ontological assumptions" (Alberti 2016: 174).

The question, therefore, comes down to the degree to which researchers can become aware of the 'core beliefs' affecting and constraining their own ontological assumptions and hence acting as an interpretative filter for the data under investigation, data that is otherwise often considered to be objective and quite self-explanatory. This is the same problem that Hallowell confronted when he tried to communicate his findings concerning the ontology, behavior, and worldview of the Ojibwe to his Western acculturated readers. He began by offering a definition of the concept of worldview, saying that it is "that outlook upon the universe that is characteristic of a people" (Hallowell 1960: 19). He went on to write:

> *Human beings in whatever culture are provided with cognitive orientation in a cosmos: there is 'order' and 'reason' rather than chaos. There are basic premises and principles implied even if these do not happen to be consciously formulated and articulated by the people themselves. We are confronted with the philosophical implications of their thought, the nature of the world of being as they conceive it. If we pursue the problem deeply enough we soon come face to face with a relatively unexplored territory—ethno-metaphysics. Can we penetrate this realm in other cultures? … The problem is a complex and difficult one, but this should not preclude its exploration*. (ibid.: 20)

When discussing the European materials and the remnants of bear ceremonialism encountered in them, there is an associated limitation that needs to be addressed. Implicit in the interpretative framework often utilized by researchers, albeit unreflectively, is the assumption that agency should be assigned only to humans. In cultures where non-human entities are regularly assigned agency, there has been a tendency to define this as "animism" and set that belief apart from Western thought. When doing this, however, one fails to recognize the fact that Western culture itself is not monolithic. It has multiple ontological spaces and regularly assigns agency to non-human entities, often ritual objects or things having less official religious recognition, such as a lucky rabbit's foot or a badger paw (Frank 2017a). Moreover, it follows that the resulting anthropocentric framework of agency is colored by assumptions deriving from the prevailing set of Western asymmetric dualisms, the foremost among them being the human-animal divide and the concept of human exceptionalism that accompanies it (Frank 2005, 2018).

3. THE BEAR'S SON TALE IN EUROPE AND NORTH AMERICA

At this juncture we will look at processes of cultural appropriation and assimilation from a different angle; concretely, the way that the same European folktale ended up being appropriated and craftily assimilated by Native American tribes. As I have noted elsewhere (Frank 2008a), initially my fieldwork and archival research focused almost exclusively on the Basque region of the Pyrenees. As time passed, I discovered that variants of the Bear's Son stories were common throughout Europe (Barakat 1965, 1967; Claudel 1952; Cosquin 1887; Espinosa 1946, 1947, 1951). Much earlier and without fully recognizing its significance as an ethnographic signature of a pan-European cosmology and the belief that humans descended from bears, the surprisingly widespread distribution of the Bear's Son tale had already caught the attention of researchers and was an object of serious investigation by ethnographers in the 1880s (Cosquin 1887: 1–27). By 1910, Panzer had documented 221 European variants of the ATU 301 story type, the descent of the Bear's Son hero to the underworld (Panzer 1910). In a study published in 1959, 57 Hungarian versions of the tale are mentioned (Kiss 1959). In 1992, Stitt, in his study *Beowulf and the Bear's Son: Epic, Saga, and Fairytale in Northern Germanic Tradition*, recorded 120 variants of the Bear's Son story for Scandinavia alone (Stitt 1992).

In addition, variants of the Bear's Son tales, carried to the New World only a few centuries ago, have been found in Louisiana, New Mexico, and Missouri, as well as in various parts of Mexico and the French-, English-, and Spanish-

speaking areas of the Caribbean (Carrière 1937; Colgrave 1951; Espinosa 1914, 1946, 1947, 1951, 1952; Parsons 1933, 1936). More remarkably, the Bear's Son tales have passed into the indigenous languages of North America for they have been recorded among the Mi'kmaq, Shoshoni, Assiniboin, Ojibwe, as well as the Thompson River Indians, the Chilcotin Indians of British Columbia and the Zapotec Indians of Tehuantepec in Mexico (Boas 1912, 1925; Deans 1889; Lowie 1909a: 147–150, 246; 1909b: 298–299; Mason 1914; Teit 1909: 702–707; 1912: 292–294, 393–395; S. Thompson 1946: 86, 1966 [1929]; Wheeler 1943).

According to research conducted by Boas at the beginning of the past century, "apparently there is such a vast array of tales [among Native Americans] containing parallel elements, probably of greater age in America than that of 'John the Bear', that their presence seems to have facilitated the introduction of this [European] tale" (Boas 1912: 258 ff.). Although Boas does not explicitly mention the central role played by the bear in the cosmology of these Native American peoples, this much more archaic belief system probably contributed to the positive reception of the European Bear's Son tales and their assimilation to such a degree that they became viewed as part of Native American oral traditions, as Boas and others have documented (Brown 1993; Ewers 1955; Rockwell 1991; Teit 1909, 1912). While Native American adaptations of the Bear's Son cycle have often blended with indigenous motifs, they are, nonetheless, easily recognized as versions of the European story.

Some thirty years ago, when I published the first article in the series of papers entitled "Hunting the European Sky Bears" (Frank 1996), I included a brief section on the distribution of the Bear's Son tales, both inside and outside of Europe. Ever since that time, I have continued to be intrigued by the way that the European Bear's Son folktale was appropriated, how it was adopted, adapted, and modified by Native American storytellers. For instance, there is evidence that when the Native Americans heard the stories told by Europeans, they were struck by that fact that embedded in the tales was an initial episode where the half-human, half-bear hero acquired his spirit helper animals, each of which in turn would give the protagonist a talisman. When he touched it, he got the ability to shapeshift and take on the form of each of the animal helpers. Subsequently, once transformed into one of the spirit animals, ritual battles would take place pitting a predator animal against an opponent who was prey. As will be discussed in more detail, the backdrop was that of a hunting culture. Naturally, the Native story tellers and their audiences would have been struck by the hero's own mixed parentage – that his mother was a human and his father a bear.

Clearly, in the process of establishing themselves as part of the oral repertoire of the Indians of North America, the tales were reanalyzed so that they

reflected indigenous cultural norms more closely. That is, once translated into the indigenous language, the European materials were reworked by the native storytellers and assimilated directly into the indigenous oral repertoire. Moreover, the plot of the Bear's Son tale would have seemed quite familiar to them since in their repertoire of oral narrative marriages between bears and humans were relatively commonplace (Barbeau 1946; Rockwell 1991). In other words, the European tale would have resonated strongly with the preexisting cultural conceptualizations concerning bears and humans. That orientation would have contextualized the tales for them, but in a manner that was no longer accessible to a European audience. For this reason, a more detailed study of these New World versions of the stories could provide valuable insights into the motivations behind their reception and transformation.

In 1912, Boas indicated that he wanted to carry out such an investigation, but it was never completed (Boas 1912). Nonetheless, we can see that among Native American groups the figure of the Bear's Son reappears as *Ladi ri quicha huini* (Little Hairy Body) among the Zapotec Indians of Mexico; as Plenty-of-Hair among the Assiniboin; as *Sna'naz* in the stories of the Thompson River Indians, that is, among the Salish, also known as Nlaka'pamux or Nlakapamuk of southern British Columbia. That the Bear's Son hero shows up related to a character called *Sna'naz*, also called Redcap, was recorded by Teit (1912) in the lower part of the canyon of the Fraser River in British Columbia. He appears as *Buchetsa* among the Shuswap of British Columbia.

It is probably not a coincidence that this is the same zone in which the tale called "The Woman who Married a Bear" played such a major role in the cultural life of the people, as has been exhaustively documented by Barbeau (1946). "This tale, in so far as we know it, belongs to the Tsimsyan, the Haida, the Tlingit, and other neighboring tribes of the North Pacific Coast and northern Rockies of America, and the bears concerned are grizzlies" (Barbeau 1946: 2). Furthermore, the ancestry of these Native peoples is traced back to the grizzlies that appear in the sacred story. The implications of the Bear Mother story have been addressed by Shepard and Sanders (1992: 59–60). It has also been retold and interpreted by many other investigators (Barbeau 1946; Bieder 2006; Deans 1889; Edsman 1956; Henderson 2020; McClellan 1970; Rockwell 1991: 116–121). While the central theme clearly continues to be the affirmation of the kinship between bears and humans, other aspects of the tale might not be as readily grasped by a contemporary European, such as the resulting profound fluidity of being, human identity, and personhood.

In the case of the ethnographers and folklorists who collected the Bear's Son tales in North America, I have found only one instance in which there was an attempt to elicit additional contextual information directly from the informant,

the native storyteller who provided the story of "John the Bear". In 1939, Hallowell published an article about several myths and folktales of European derivation that he had collected among a branch of the Ojibwe Nations in Canada and, more concretely, among the Saulteaux of the Berens River, Manitoba (Hallowell 1939). One of the stories was a very changed version of "John the Bear". In it there is no mention of the hero's extraordinary birth, even though the character's name would have communicated his ursine nature to the teller's audience. Curiously, the story begins with the hero having to guard a farmer's garden from a kind of bird that attempts to steal food from it. Eventually the bird becomes his friend, and the hero acquires several wives.

The plot of the tale is quite convoluted, and as Hallowell observes, "farming, except for raising a few potatoes, is totally outside the experience of these northern hunters". Nonetheless, Hallowell provides these details about his informant. First, the narrator of the tale was one of the oldest Indians of the Grand Rapids Band and son of Pazagwí'gabo, a famous headman of the Midewiwin. And second, Ki'wí'tc, the storyteller, remarked "after telling the story, that the hero was one of the most powerful guardian spirits, the 'boss of farming'" (Hallowell 1939: 179).

This comment brings us to two ways in which Native Americans may have approached the Bear's Son narratives. The distinction between them, taken from research on oral traditions of the Lenape Delaware, which is another Algonquian-speaking group, will help us contrast the standard European way of reading of the tales with the way in which they might have been received by Native American audiences. The contrast has to do with two basic classes of narrations: those "which pass among the Delawares as epics having a mythological explanatory origin and those which are mere chronicles of happenings in past or present experiences of life. … The distinction between these categories is something like what differentiates a saga from a narrative. The former is a legend concerning characters and events which do not change in the telling, partaking of the nature of gospels" (Speck 1937: 12).

In a similar line, Hallowell states that the Ojibwe distinguish two general types of traditional oral stories. One type is that of "news or tidings", consisting of anecdotes or stories referring to events in the lives of human beings. Thus, "narratives of this class range from everyday occurrences, through more exceptional experiences, to those that verge on the legendary" (Hallowell 1960: 26). The second type are what Hallowell refers to as myths, defining them as "sacred stories, which are not only traditional and formalized, their narration is seasonally restricted and is somewhat ritualized" (ibid.). He continues explaining that the "significant thing about these stories is that the characters are regarded as living entities who have existed from time immemorial. … Whether human or

animal in form or name, the major characters in the myths behave like people, though many of their activities are depicted in a spatiotemporal framework of cosmic, rather than mundane, dimensions" (ibid.: 27).[1]

Narrations belonging to the second category, as described by Hallowell, are viewed as containing important teachings and comprising a body of sacred learning, whereas the former can be understood primarily as entertainment, although the boundary between the two types can be blurred. Moreover, the nature of the interpretative template depends on the cultural conceptualizations of the audience, that is, on the cognitive orientation of the perceiver which in turn is culturally constituted. In the former case the stories become repositories of information concerning the order of the universe and the human morality appropriate therein. Yet given the nature of the Native American versions of the Bear's Son tale that have survived and have been collected, they would seem to fall primarily into the category of entertainment. At the same time, the ursine connections of the hero were probably a detail that caught the attention of the storyteller and the members of the audience.

3.1 Examining versions of the European tale

While we cannot determine how the original European story was received and understood by Native Americans, the early versions undoubtedly continued to reflect aspects of the plotline that were retained in versions of the tale recorded by Carrière in the state of Missouri among French-Canadian speakers. These contain striking details found also in versions collected in the Pyrenees as well as northern Spain (Frank 2017b, 2019, 2022, forthcoming). And these details include the appearance of four spirit animal helpers, a lion or wild cat, a hunting dog, an eagle and an ant, who each gives the hero a talisman. These talismans allow him to acquire the powers of each of the animals when needed and the ability to take on the shape of the animal in question. In other words, he acquires the ability to shapeshift.

Upon closer examination of the tale, it becomes clear that the talismans the half-bear, half-human protagonist receives have a purpose. He obtains them initially from the animals for having helped them divide up a dead beast that they want to eat and have been arguing over. Later, when the magic formula that will allow the hero to overcome his adversary is revealed, it becomes clear that the talismans he has gotten from the spirit animals are precisely the ones which will now allow him to shapeshift, taking on the form of one animal after another. As an aside, when he is given the talismans, he is advised to keep them so that he can use their shapeshifting abilities in the future, although

the listener does not yet know just how important they will become. In certain respects, the animal talismans are reminiscent of the objects acquired in a Native American vision quest which are safeguarded in a medicine bundle. Hence, considered collectively, the talismans could be seen as the European equivalent of a medicine bundle (Lokensgard 2010; Whitley 2014). Indeed, as has been pointed out by others, the scenario recalls the age-old vision quest, known as *hanbleceya* among the Plains Indians of North America. This ritual has been a focal point in the religious life of most Native Americans (Brown 1990, 1993; McGaa 1990: 75–83). Among the Cree who are Algonquian-speakers as are the Ojibwe, the vision quest is focused on the acquisition of one's personal spirit animal helper or *powakan* who is sought through fasting and sometimes appears in a dream (Waugh 1996: 56–60).

From another angle, the adventures of the Bear's Son could be analogized to those of a young shaman apprentice whose ursine ancestry is quite evident. The encounter with the four spirit animal helpers is a key element in the plot. As will become evident in the following summary of the storyline, it is precisely this encounter that makes possible the rest of the actions in the story and the final successful outcome on the part of the hero. As has been noted, early on the hero has an encounter that allows him to acquire his four spirit animal helpers. Walking along a path in the woods, he spies four animals ahead of him standing next to a dead beast. They are, as mentioned, a lion or wild cat, a hunting dog, an eagle, and an ant. Lion calls out to him: "We're hungry and have been arguing about how to divide up the meat. Can you help us?" The hero responds saying that he will try. "Lion, I'll give you the haunch which is what you like best." And to Hunting Dog, he gives the ribs. Addressing Eagle, he says: "To you I'll give the innards and intestines because you don't have any teeth, and this is what you like best." Finally, to the tiny Ant, he says, "To you I'll give the skin and bones and when you've eaten the marrow from the bones you can use them for your house when it rains." With that, Lion responds: "You've done so well with the division that we want to reward you." And each of them gives him a talisman, telling him that when he needs their help all he has to do is touch the object and call out the animal's name. That way he will gain the animal's innate abilities: he will be able to take on the shape of the animal in question. Lion gives him a tuff of fur, Hunting Dog another tuff; Eagle a feather, and little Ant a leg because she has several.

Time passes, and the Bear's Son finds himself at a farmstead where he meets a young woman who lives there with an old man who might be her father or her master. Naturally, since all good stories need a romantic twist, the hero falls in love and wants to run off with the young woman. But she explains to him that she cannot leave because she must care for the old man who happens

to be immortal. The hero insists that there must be a way to get the old man to die so she will be free to leave.

At this point the first example of shapeshifting takes place. The young woman tells him to come back the next day to the garden where she will be combing the old man's hair and removing his lice. The hero is to climb up into a tree located next to them and hide in its branches while she asks the old fellow what will make him die. So, the Bear's Son shows up, shapeshifted into an ant, and climbs silently up into the tree from where he overhears the old man's response: "For me to die, the challenger will have to do battle with my brother who is a shapeshifter, too. He will appear as a porcupine and the challenger must show up as a lion and engage in battle with him. If he triumphs, a hare will appear, and then the challenger must turn into a dog and catch it." The old man continues explaining: "Once the hare is caught, a pigeon will fly up and my opponent must turn into an eagle, snatch the pigeon, open it, remove the egg inside, take the egg and break it on the forehead of my brother who by then will appear as a snake (or dragon). When that happens, the egg inside my head will break and I will become mortal and die." In other versions of the tale, the old man has no brother, and it is the old man himself who shapeshifts into each of the prey animals. That the old man is a shapeshifter, too, suggests that there was shamanic frame operating in the background of the tale.

Naturally, since the hero has been pre-equipped by his four helper animals, he is able to follow these instructions successfully, shapeshifting into one animal after another, while his opponent does the same. In the end the shapeshifted snake (or dragon) is defeated, and the Bear's Son's opponent is no longer immortal. And, hence, the young woman is now free to leave. Yet the identity of the antagonist is vague. Even though he might be understood as the old father of the young woman, the exact nature of the relationship between the two is never made explicit in any of the variants of the tale. Nevertheless, the fact that the young woman says she cannot leave the old man might be interpreted as him keeping her captive against her will. Other Basque versions of the tale link the figure of the old man to the Herensuge, the serpent or dragon in Basque mythology, who is killed by a blow to his forehead with a magical egg (Satrústegui 1975: 18–21).

When interpreted on a deeper level, what we find in the tale is a series of purely ritual battles between two shapeshifters, one of whom is already half-bear, and his older adversary. From this perspective, the role of the four spirit animal helpers is of fundamental importance to the hero, beginning with the smallest one, Ant. Moreover, there is a pattern to the ritual confrontations: they are all encounters between a predator animal and its prey, except for the last where it is a pigeon egg that becomes the vehicle for making the Old Man/Snake mortal.

Table 1. *The Predator-Prey pattern in the Bear's Son Tale*

Predator	Prey
Lion	Porcupine
Hunting Dog	Hare
Eagle	Pigeon
[Pigeon Egg]	Snake

Viewed from this perspective, the backdrop of the tale is nature itself. Plus, in times past, the narration would have taken place in a landscape where witnessing such predator-prey encounters would have been a commonplace occurrence. In this respect, the ritual battles portrayed in the tale could be understood as mapping onto scenes regularly witnessed by members of the audience in which real predator animals were hunting for their lunch. By extension, a child, upon seeing an eagle swoop down on a pigeon, might have connected the corresponding scene in the Bear's Son narrative to what was taking place in the sky above. And that process could have led to a kind of mythologizing of nature that would have coincided with a hunter-gatherer mentality.

3.2 The role of research on tale types in obscuring the plotline linkages

Most European folklorists are primarily focused on versions of "John the Bear" in which his helpers are extraordinarily large human males with superhuman strength. As a result, little attention has been paid to the fact that the anthropomorphic nature of the helpers is an overlay on the older animist template, more in consonance with a hunter-gatherer worldview, in which the helpers were all animals. The lack of attention concerning this point can be explained by the fact that over the past century, one of the primary concerns of researchers working in the field of folkloristics has been the creation of *tale types* that permit the classification of the stories and, in theory, allow for cross-cultural comparisons.

For instance, in tales categorized as "John the Bear", the hero is often portrayed as descending to the underworld to rescue up to three captive princesses. This is a plot line that has elicited many different scholarly labels (Cosquin 1887: 1–27). The most well-known is that of Aarne-Thompson (Aarne & Thompson 1961: 90–93), who refer to the story as "The Three Stolen Princesses" (ATU 301) with the following variants: "Quest for a Vanished Princess" (ATU 301A),

"The Strong Man and His Companions Journey to the Land of Gold" (ATU 301B), "The Magic Objects" (ATU 301C), and "The Dragons Ravish Princesses" (ATU 301D). Hansen (1957: 24–25, 75–77) classified the tale similarly, with some modifications. But he also saw that ATU 301 combined quite often with "Strong John" ("Der Starke Hans") (ATU 650A).

Furthermore, no particular significance has been attributed by folklorists to the fact that in ATU 301 and its variants the hero is regularly portrayed as having a human mother and an ursine father, even when the hero is described as very hairy or having bear ears. At times, he is described as a human from the waist up and a bear from the waist down. In the case of ATU 650A, "Strong John", his ursine paternity is not mentioned. The hero of that tale type is merely described as extraordinarily strong without any explanation for why this is so. However, at times he is described as having the strength of fourteen men or eating as much as fourteen men, but again, without any reason being given for why this is so or why the number fourteen plays a role. In the Basque language variants of the tale classed collectively as ATU 650A, the main character is called *Hamalau*, a term that translates literally as the number fourteen (Frank 2008b). Consequently, discovering tales in Romance languages, for example, in Spanish, Catalan, and Italian versions of ATU 650A, where the hero is called Fourteen, suggests that the ultimate source of those tales was probably the Basque-language version itself and that at some point a form of bilingualism played a role in the transmission of the tales.

We need to remember that the label "The Bear's Son" is a broad one for it encompasses ATU 301 and all its variants and, as has been mentioned, this tale type has been linked to ATU 650A, "Strong John". A key element in the plotline of ATU 301 is the fact, as mentioned, that the protagonist acquires two or more unusually strong and fully anthropomorphic companions. When the plotline is compared and viewed diachronically, we can see that over time these fully anthropomorphic helpers replaced the four spirit animal helpers found in older variants. This realignment, however, did not eliminate the earlier version. Instead, the version that kept the animal helpers ended up relegated by folklorists to a totally separate and supposedly unrelated tale type, ATU 554, called "The Grateful Animals". And, to complicate matters even more, garbled up versions of the episode of the four spirit animal helpers resurfaced in many languages in a tale type referred to as "The Ogre's (Devil's) Heart in the Egg" (ATU 302). A myriad of variants of ATU 302 have been documented in depth by Frazer (1913: 95–141) and these come from all across Europe.

Little attention has been paid to this latter tale type or the fact that the episodes making up the storyline of ATU 554 and ATU 302 overlap in remarkable ways. One of the few studies addressing this topic is that of Vinson who

in his collection of Basque folktales talks about a tale called "Les Dons des Trois Animaux" (The Gifts of the Three Animals) (Vinson 1883: I, 166–177; II, 129–131). There are several Spanish-language tales with a melding of motifs from ATU 301, ATU 302, ATU 650A, and ATU 554, including two versions of a story called "La princesa encantada" (The Enchanted Princess) (Espinosa 1946: 321–337; 1947: 9–55), another called "La serpiente de siete cabezas" (The Seven-Headed Serpent) and two versions of "El cuerpo sin alma" (The Body/ Corpse without a Soul) collected by Wheeler (1943: 317–339).

To summarize, over time the plot of the European tale broke into pieces, each of which realigned itself in ways that reflect the changing cultural conceptualizations of the times. Hence, we find that narratives associated with the expression the Bear's Son include ATU 301, plus ATU 301a, b, c, and d, variants globally referred to by folklorists as "The Three Princesses", a reference to the three princesses that are rescued by the hero. At the same time there are other tale types that form part of the same narrative tradition, the same phylogenetic narrative linage: ATU 650A "Strong John", ATU 554 "The Grateful Animals", and ATU 302, now shortened to "Soul in an Egg". In sum, over time the storyline and episodes associated with the earlier version of the tale became fragmented and, as a result, were classified as different tale types (ATU 650A, ATU 554, ATU 302, and ATU 301, plus at least four subtypes of ATU 301).

4. RETURNING TO THE NATIVE AMERICAN TALES

Keeping all of this in mind, as well as considering the prominent role played by the bear among Native Americans, it would be quite logical to expect that the Bear's Son tale with its half-human, half-bear protagonist received a warm reception when it arrived in North America. In Spanish versions of these tales the hero regularly appeared bearing the name of *Juan el Osito* (John Little Bear) or *Juanito el Oso* (Little John, the Bear), while in French versions we find him as *Jean l'Ours* (John of the Bear) and *P'tit Jean* (Little John). Hence, it is not surprising to find Boas (1925) pointing out that among North American Indians one of the most widely disseminated types of French tales consisted of stories describing the adventures of a young hero called *P'tit Jean* (Little John). Narratives featuring *P'tit Jean* include many that go back to European versions of "The Bear's Son" (ATU 301), "The Grateful Animals" (ATU 554) and "Soul in an Egg" (ATU 302), while many others are trickster and noodle tales (Carrière 1937: 19–80).

The French versions of these stories were bought into the region quite early. For example, there is little question that the exploits of their hero, *P'tit Jean*, entered the state of Missouri early on, disseminated by a group of French-

Canadian immigrants who settled in an area called La Veille Mine after crossing the Mississippi from Illinois in the 1790s. Migration patterns like these undoubtedly helped to spread the European tales among the local inhabitants, including Native American groups. Moreover, the fact that French versions of the tale were the source of the versions that ended up in these Native languages is evidenced by the way that the name of the hero was transmitted. Boas (1925: 199–200) writes that *P'tit Jean* (Little John) was the name taken over by Native Americans. In the French-Canadian dialect spoken by the inhabitants of La Veille Mine the name of the hero shows up as *P'tsit Jean*.

More interesting perhaps is the fact that the same name appears in a phonologically distorted and abbreviated form in the folktales collected by Hallowell among the Berens River Saulteaux, namely, as *Tci'ja* and as *Tci'jas* (diminutive) (Hallowell 1939: 173–174). In the Salteaux stories *Tci'ja* or *Tci'jas* is a hero of forlorn or ragged appearance. In other words, according to Hallowell, he is portrayed as a powerful individual who looks like a "nobody" and this was "an idea congenial to native psychology. The multiple titles to these stories are a key to the occurrence of similar episodes in European prototypes that do not necessarily have *P'tit Jean* as their hero. The connecting link evidently is in French-Canadian folklore in which the episodes have become attached to this character" (Hallowell 1939: 173).[2] Stated differently, the character who started out as the Bear's Son, took on a life of his own as a trickster once the tales passed into Native languages.

In summary, Espinosa (1952) cites the existence of forty-seven versions of the Bear's Son tale from the Western Hemisphere; thirty-three of these were collected in Spanish America and nine from North American Indians. However, there are probably many more, but they simply have not been identified. Furthermore, to my knowledge, the examples collected among Native American groups have never been subjected to detailed study to see, for example, what elements from the European tale were kept, what elements were changed and, more importantly, what features of the stories are additions that allowed the tales to take on characteristics that would ring culturally true to members of their audience. In this sense, there are elements that reflect the way that the Native storytellers incorporated Native conceptual frames of reference, reshaping and adjusting the tales to better fit the understandings of their audience. The process of acculturating the tales was brought about by modifying aspects of the storyline and characters. At times these changes are significant. At others the modifications are relatively minor. But taken collectively, they allowed the original story to be adapted and acclimatized to a new audience and culture.

Another aspect of the tales that has not been fully addressed has to do with the reasons why Native storytellers might have felt such a strong affinity with

versions of the Bear's Son tale. There seems to have been a fondness for the main character, enough that he went on to take on a life of his own. Another consideration is the question of how the story ended up housed in these Native languages. Obviously, the process that brought about this result was one that probably took place in three stages. First, there would have been a stage that involved interactions between European storytellers who were probably monolingual, and Native Americans who were bilingual. After having heard the tale enough times, the next step would have been taken: the translation of the tale into the Native language by bilingual individuals. The third stage concerns what happened to the story once it was translated and was being retold to Native audiences. It would have been at this point that the main character would have taken on distinctive characteristics and further details from the Native culture would have been introduced. It was only long after that process of acculturation had taken place that folklorists would go about collecting the stories, fieldwork that for the most part did not take place until the beginning of the twentieth century or even later (Boas 1912, 1925; Deans 1889; Lowie 1909a: 147–150, 246; 1909b: 298–299; Mason 1914; Teit 1909: 702–707; 1912: 292–294, 393–395; S. Thompson 1946: 86; 1966 [1929]; Wheeler 1943).

5. FINAL OBSERVATIONS

Although we cannot precisely date when the Bear's Son tale first arrived at these shores, versions of the tale have been identified in Europe dating to the 1600s. The earliest recorded example is a literary version of the tale from 1634 (Blécourt 2012: 179–181). Another version appears in Topsell's popular work, *The History of Four-footed Beasts and Serpents and Insects* (Topsell 1967 [1658]: 29).[3] As for the topic of how the tale reached America and spread around, there is good reason to believe that French fur traders played a major role in introducing the story to Native Americans.

Speaking of the early French settlers and the oral traditions they brought with them, Boas remarks that as employees of the Hudson's Bay Company and as independent fur traders, the newcomers carried their lore over extended areas of the continent and, as a result, quite a variety of French material became part of Native American lore. Folktales like the story of "John the Bear" are found wherever the French fur traders went.

> *Generally these tales retain so much of their European setting that they may be readily recognized as foreign elements, although there are cases in which the assimilation has progressed so far that we might be doubtful in*

> *regard to their origin, if the plot did not show so clearly their European connections*. (Boas 1925: 200)

The story seems to have begun circulating in Canada and later in locations to the south where these European trappers and woodsmen traveled and, in some cases, eventually settled. Along the way there would have been many opportunities for the exchange of goods and for storytelling. Clues such as the name given to the hero in the Ojibwe versions of the tale lead us to conclude that the transmission process involved relatively extensive contacts between French speakers and Natives. For the transfer to have taken place would have required enough knowledge of the language of these newcomers, namely, French, that the locals were able to listen and understand the stories being told and later take them home with them, where they could be retold in that storyteller's native tongue. And that storytelling process and resulting transfer of oral tradition probably happened many times over.

As to how the tales circulated after they were translated, for example, into one or more of the Algonquian languages (Fig. 2), such as Objiwe, is a question that remains to be investigated. It could also be that a second level channel of transmission developed in which the story passed from one Native language to another without any need for further intervention on the part of French speakers. Obviously for the European tale to be reshaped and to take on so many features of the Indigenous cultures required time. Those modifications require us to imagine scenarios in which it was being retold over and over. This complex process of oral transmission allowed it to pass from one generation to the next until finally folklorists became aware of the stories at the end of the nineteenth century.

In the previous sections of this study, briefly explored some of the factors intrinsic to the cosmology of Algonquian-speaking peoples and other Native groups, including the role of bears, which might have helped to bring about the adoption of the Bear's Son as one of their own. Although the reasons that led to this tale and its variants surviving across some three centuries are probably numerous and overlapping, that the tale served some purpose is clear while its survival underscores the importance of the role of storytelling in maintaining social cohesion (T. Thompson 2010).

To conclude, the current investigation has only touched the surface of what could be gleaned from the study of the Native American versions of the tales. Whereas we have a general idea of how the European stories were structured when they reached the New World in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the changes that were made to the stories in the process of retelling them in the indigenous languages of North America is a topic that has not been investigated.

That task must fall to someone with a far better grasp of Native American worldviews and ontologies than I have, someone with detailed knowledge of the frames of reference that Native storytellers and their audiences had in mind, and which motivated changes to the European versions. Although it is beyond my ability to carry out such an investigation, I am convinced that if an in-depth study of the Native versions of the tales is carried out, it will demonstrate the remarkable creativity of these unsung storytellers who successfully transmitted these narratives orally from one generation to the next in their Native languages.

NOTES

[1] For a more in-depth discussion of the content of these sacred narratives, see Hallowell (1960: 26–30).

[2] For several examples of these tales, see Hallowell (1939: 173–179).

[3] A curious story reminiscent of the Bear's Son tale, recorded in 1555 in a work by Olaus Magnus (1998: 712–713), is treated in a monograph currently under preparation.

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