The Cult of the Bear and Soviet Ideology in Siberia

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> It is the right of mythological thought to express itself by means of its own peculiar vocabulary which although comprehensible is nevertheless limited. However, it must use this limited vocabulary for any tasks which it takes upon itself, for it has no other tool.
>
> C. Lévi-Strauss[1]

> Nothing resembles mythological thought more closely than does political thought.
>
> C. Lévi-Strauss[2]

During the period of preparation for the October 1917 revolution, Lenin, a fanatical believer in economic determinism and the class struggle, was convinced that with the help of the Russian proletariat the peoples of Siberia could "come over to the Soviet system, and develop in steady stages towards communism, having left capitalism behind".[3] He did not give a great deal of thought to the complex cultural phenomena whose very definition (as was shown by anthropologists Kroeber and Kluckohn[4]) present extraordinary difficulties; he believed that the ideas of Marxism would easily find application and influence in a society with a "simple structure". The Russian Bolsheviks did not question the assumption that the changes in the economic base would soon lead to changes in social consciousness, eliminating what Lenin, like Marx, termed "the idiocy of village life".

However, when the revolutionary-minded activists arrived in the far reaches of Siberia and came face to face with the reality of life in traditional societies, they saw that the "primitive consciousness" of these deer-hunters, fisherman and trappers would be much more difficult to win over than the "developed consciousness" of the urban proletarians. The mythological thought of the Chukchee, Nivkh, Yukagir and other peoples, complicated by the process of millennia of symbiosis between people and nature, could not, of course, be transformed by the decree of bolshevik propagandists. Faced with alien abstract notions such as "imperialism", "commune", "international", "bourgeoisie", "dictatorship of the proletariat" and so on with which the semi-literate agitators oper-

ated in their "red *yarangas*"* and "red *chums*",** the natives of the tundra† and taiga†† preferred their own myths and rituals, rooted in their own conception of the world.

When Soviet power came to Siberia it was faced with many unexpected rivals. One of these, and by far one of the strongest, was — the bear. The cult of the bear, which has its origins in the palaeolithic period, was to be found among various peoples. The Tunguz peoples (Evenk, Even etc.) for example, believed that the bear was creator of the world, lord of the universe, and a great hero of culture who, among many other blessings, gave the people fire. A common myth among the Tunguz tells how the Great Bear was hunting his adversary who had stolen the sun, overtook him and returned with the heavenly light to the people. Several Siberian tribes used the same terms to refer to the bear, nature, the heavens and God. The bear figures in ethnic myths and legends as the primal progenitor of the various peoples. Even now in Siberia they call him "master", "grandfather", "father". The great events in the year of the Evenk, Khant, Mansi, Ket, Nivkh, and other peoples were seasonal "festivals of the bear". Some held this day after a successful hunt, others (the Nivkh for example) performed the ritual slaughter of a bear which for three years prior to the occasion had been reared in the village like one of their own kind. The ritual slaughter of the beast signified its return to the world of the spirits, who in return would bless the people with a new generation of children. This day of ritual drew together the different communities who lived widely scattered over the huge expanses. The honour of killing the bear fell to the members of allied tribes from among whom the owners of the bear had taken their brides. On the day itself all those present would be allocated a certain portion of the bear's carcass, each according to his place in the exogamic and social hierarchy. In many Siberian tribes the pelt of the bear was used by the most powerful shamans, who wore it at council meetings and thus presented themselves in the guise of the almighty master of the world.

One could say that the members of the Siberian communities were represented as a whole in the body of one bear. The bear symbolised the socio-religious organism which functioned perfectly due to this ritual metabolism: the exchange between the (human) communities and the world of the supernatural.[5]

This exchange came to a sudden end when the tide of revolution which had engulfed the distant city (where in the words of one Yukagir, "the people are as numerous as mosquitoes"[6]), also swept over the Urals. These incomprehensible events gave rise to various rumours. They said

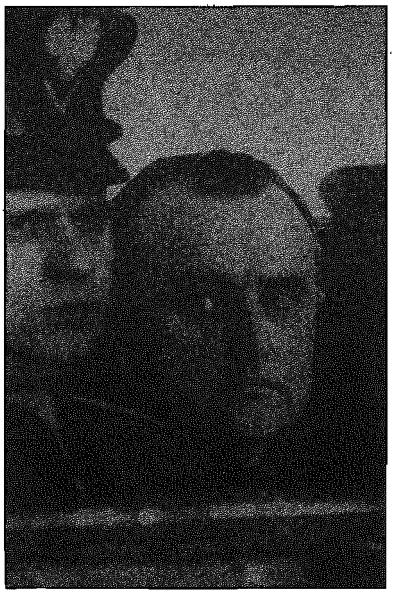
**yarange* — a dome-shaped dwelling made of animal skins.
***chum* — a tepee-shaped dwelling made of skin or tree-bark.
†Tundra — Barren arctic region where subsoil is frozen — *Ed.*
††Taiga — Coniferous forest between tundra and steppe.

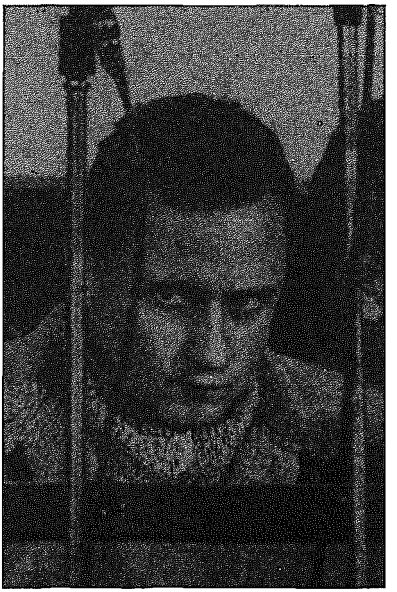
"The White Tsar is no longer, there is a Red Tsar."[7] To the taiga and the tundra there came a strange and unpronounceable new word, "revolution".

"Who is this Revolution?" — the Khant and Mansi wondered. "If he is a spirit, then what sort of spirit? A black spirit or a white spirit? An evil spirit or a good spirit? What sort of sacrifice does he demand? A large one or a small one? A sacrifice with blood or without blood?" They did not yet know whether this spirit was stronger than the bear himself, the son of the god Torum.[8] The propagandists arriving in Siberia from western Russia tried to convey to the local peoples the essence of the changes that had been achieved, by repeating the word "Lenin" like a magic formula. "Lenin", they said, "has defeated the Tsar himself". When the Chukchee heard this they suddenly realised that "Lenin is from the Moon, from the spirit of the West, from the side of darkness", since only this evil spirit could have defeated the Tsar, whom the Chukchee called the "Mighty one of the Sun" or the "Sun Master". And their Russian teacher could not convince the Chukchee that "Lenin was born of an ordinary Russian woman and that his father and mother were both ordinary people".[9] Not far from the Chukchee territory the first Yukagir writer and scientist Nikolai Spiridonov (Tekki Odulok) spoke about Lenin; he had brought back with him from Leningrad (where he had been educated) a portrait of Lenin which he showed to his kinsmen, saying, "Look *hodo shoromolok!* (What a man!); and they replied, *"Omoche shoromolok! Hoyl!** (A good man! A God!).[10]

In the early 1930s the period of collectivisation saw the beginning of the destruction of the Siberian people's traditional economy and socio-religious institutions.[11] The forcible amalgamation into collective farms was accompanied by the assembling of the local population into large, ethnically and linguistically mixed villages, which was the basis for cultural disorientation.[12] With the establishment of the concentration camp system which spread throughout the whole territory of northern Soviet Asia, the peoples of Siberia were automatically included in the new socio-economic order, based on the exploitation of slave labour on a scale unprecedented in the 20th century. The former deer-hunters, fishermen and trappers had to work at logging, mining, building roads, cities and ports, as did the many hundreds of thousands of prisoners condemned by the Soviet authorities to die in the North in the name of "Victory for the Revolution". Now the peoples of Siberia understood what was meant by the "spirit of Revolution", and realised the extent of its bloodthirsty appetite. Even the propagandist who had preached revolution to his small nation, Nikolai Spiridonov, became a sacrifice to this "spirit".[13]

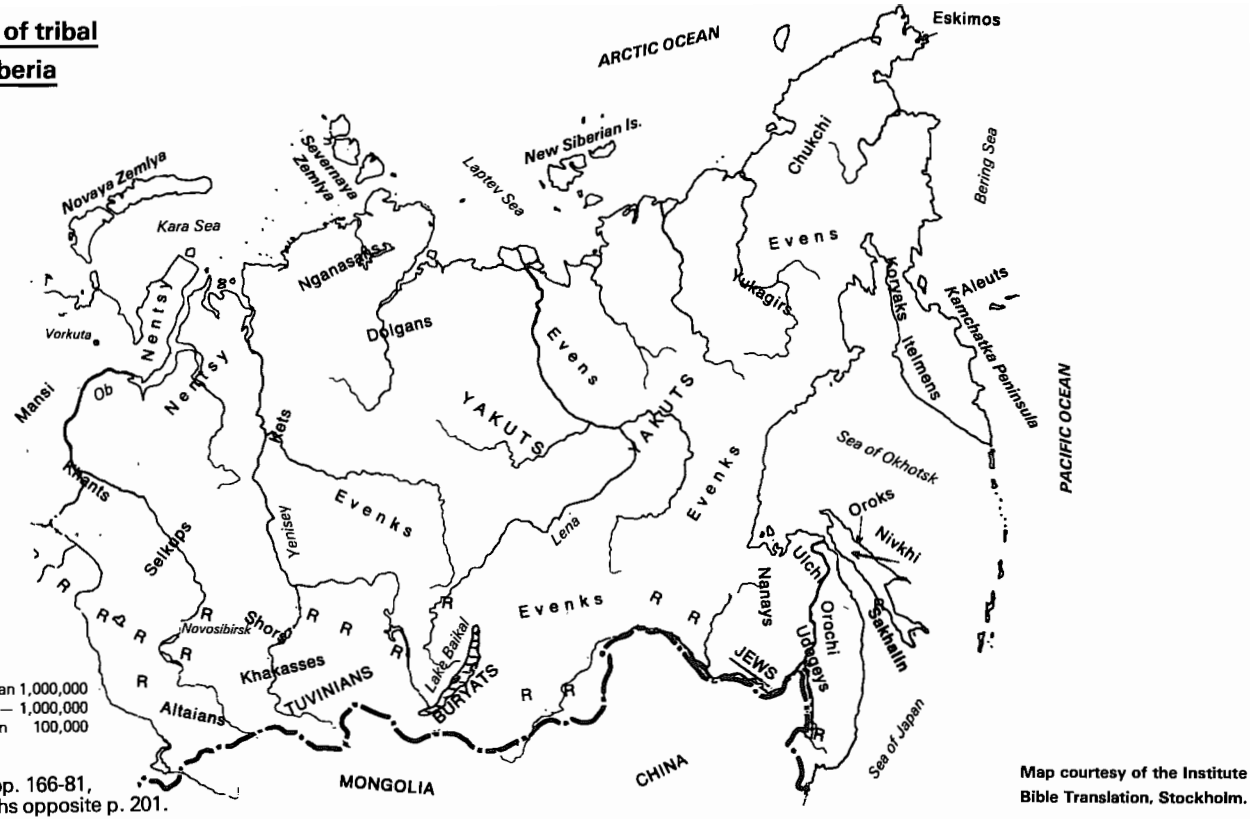
*The word *hoyl* in Yukagir means "God", but the Yukagir also used it to refer to the skull of a dead shaman which they always carried with them.





Fr Jerzy Popiełuszko's killers on trial. See article on pp. 124-30 of this issue. *Above left:* Colonel Adam Petruszka. *Above right:* Lieutenant Leszek Pękala. *Below:* the scene in the courtroom at Toruń. In the dock the defendants (out of uniform) are, from left to right: Captain Grzegorz Piotrowski, Lieutenant Waldemar Chmielewski, Colonel Adam Petruszka and, standing, Lieutenant Leszek Pękala. *(All photos courtesy Camera Press, London).*

Distribution of tribal groups in Siberia



See article on pp. 166-81, and photographs opposite p. 201.

Map courtesy of the Institute Bible Translation, Stockholm.

Having seen to the building of the "economic base" of communism, the Soviet authorities now set about creating the corresponding "superstructure". In the early 1930s Stalin abolished ethnography for several years, declaring it to be a "bourgeois science".[14] He then dissolved the "Committee of the North" which had been inspired and founded by two great authorities on ethnography, Vladimir Bogoraz and Lev Shernberg, to defend the interests of "the small nations".[15] The ethnographers learned their lesson well: in 1923 Bogoraz was still in a position to inform the Soviet government that the development of the national and ethnic groups of the North must take place without any artificial aids or the exertion of influence from outside;[16] in 1932, under the influence of communist "re-education", he was advocating the struggle against Christianity and shamanism in Siberia. He suggested that in order to discredit both religions, the propagandists should publicly "identify the death and resurrection of Christ with the mystery of the bear cult, which claims the death and resurrection of the almighty beast-god."[17]

The pupils followed their teacher's example. A young Komsomol member, an ethnographer who had been making a study in western Siberia of the problem of the origin of theatre, as for example, in the ritual bear-festivals of the Khant and Mansi, called for the abolition of this phenomenon of rural culture because, he claimed, the bear-festival "places the kulaks and shamans in the role of tribunes who propagate their anti-Soviet activities."[18] Another pupil of Bogoraz who had studied the bear-festival in the eastern region of Siberia writes that the local authorities recommended to the Nivkh that they immediately kill all the bears being kept in the villages awaiting the seasonal sacrificial day, and replace them with cows from the collective farms which they were to rear in order to fulfil "the historic decision of the party concerning livestock".[19] But the primitive reasoning of the local communists, failing to grasp the difference between a bear and a cow, preferred the latter as a symbol of the five-year plan. The Nivkh mind as we have seen, accorded far greater significance to the bear. A cow could therefore not replace a bear; only a creature with at least comparable supernatural powers to the "Lord of the taiga" could possibly rival the bear. But a hero for the new mythology already existed. It came from the western Russian empire, now called the USSR, and was brought by the propagandists' own hands. It demonstrated the mighty power possessed by the "Leader of the Revolution" with the aid of the "mover of darkness" — the cinema and the "little sun" — this hero was electricity.

The new mythology

In our opinion the year which marked the beginning of the intensive and calculated formation of the new mythology in Siberia was 1937. It was in this sad and momentous year that the journal "Soviet Arctic" published

an article, "The Tundra is Singing". In the opinion of the writer of the article, the tundra was singing about Leninist-Stalinist national policy, but no-one knew the songs. And the writer asks the question: "Why not organise, for the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of the October revolution, a collection of the national songs and stories dedicated to Lenin and Stalin? Why not collect and teach such works as those of Suleiman Stal'sky and Dzhambul* in the region of the Great North? Why not organise for the twentieth October anniversary a work which combines the poems and songs of the Lapps, the Chukchee, the Evenks, the Nenets, all the peoples condemned by capitalism to ruin and complete extinction? Such a work would be a hymn to our happy Motherland and her beloved leader. It would be part of the political manifestation of the extraordinary polar dawn. This can and must be done."[20]

And it was done. In one of the following issues of the same journal an article appeared which asserted that "today's theme in the folklore of the peoples of the North is the theme of the leaders of the revolution."[21] The folklore hero of these various nations was suddenly "the Russian *bogatyr***-Lenin" (who was shortly eclipsed by that other "Russian hero" — Stalin). So how did this hero take shape? Using the methodology of ethnographic reconstruction, we can suggest how this Soviet-Siberian myth came into being. The following hypothesis is the result of the analysis of many sources.

Many, many years earlier, the few inhabitants of the tundra (and taiga) lived in a part of the globe where cold, hunger and darkness reigned. The people died from fear and anguish. The fact of the matter was that these unfortunate people were deprived of the sun which had been stolen from them by the rich (the *kulaks,* the capitalists). But one day a hero, called Lenin (Stalin) who dwelt in the very centre of the earth, heard about the unfortunate Nenets, Khant, Evenk, Chukchee, Koryak, Yukagir and so on. He decided to help them, and set out to do so. This hero, "master of all lands" was as mighty as a mountain, his face shone like the sun, and his eyes flashed like stars. He defeated all monsters, took the sun from them and gave it to the people. From then on the sun always gave light to the earth and people once more learned to laugh, and began to live carefree, happy lives, wanting for nothing. Lenin (Stalin) became the mighty father of all children of the taiga and tundra, and for this reason the population of the North increased. Then Lenin died, but it was only a temporary death, for Lenin lived on (as distinct from Stalin who apparently died a

*Suleiman Stal'sky and Dzhambul Dzhabayev were celebrities in the Stalinist era, forgotten today. The former produced "the people's poetry of Dagestan", while the latter sang "in the name of the Kazakh people". The poems and songs of these "people's poets", always published in Russian, were the work of Russian poets, reasonably well re-worked in "poetry translations" of "the people's poets". This "art" was useful to the authorities in ideological terms and to the poets in material terms.

Bogatyr* — Hero in Russian folklore — *Ed.

permanent death). Lenin lives forever and will always come to the aid of people when they need him.

In this simple Soviet myth Lenin clearly replaced the bear completely in all its functions. But we have good reason to doubt the authentic grounds for the birth and evolution of this myth. In any case, the supposed link between Lenin and the idea of fertility postulated by the myth was entirely false. According to the official statistics, which show that many of the "small nations" of Siberia became even smaller in number during the period of Sovietisation, one is forced to come to the conclusion that the hero of the Soviet myth was in fact a poor father to his "children".[22]

Ethnic groups	CENSUS 1926	1959
Evenk	38,804	24,151
Chukchee	12,321	11,727
Koryak	7,120	6,223
Nivkh	4,076	3,717
Eskimo	1,290	1,118
Ket	1,300	1,019
Yukagir	454	442

Of course the Russian "folklore specialists" easily found "people's poets" in Siberia who began to write simple little poems. One immediately appeared "in translation" from Nenets:

"Stalin — the winged sun
A star, inspired with the wisdom of Time"[23]

or, "in translation" from Yukagir:

"My father rightly told me as a child
Lenin brought summer to the Yukagir."[24]

However, this "poetry" did not damage the true national ideas of the peoples of Siberia, in which the bear had always occupied a much greater place than the leader of the revolution.

The cult of the bear

Today the Ket hunters have no memory of Stalin really coming to their villages, really being in banishment there, but on the other hand they do still believe in the transfiguration of their dead into a bear. In 1959, when the Ket of the village of Sulomai found one of their kinsmen half-eaten by a bear, they understood that this had really been done by the man's father who had died 17 years earlier; he had now found his son and taken revenge on him because he had not performed the funeral rites for his father according to all the laws, but had taken his body into the tundra. According to Ket custom it was vital that the murderer-bear should be burnt in

the fire, that is, they must by cremation of the body of their "kinsman", return him to the form of a bear. Two years later the people of this village killed a bear which they divined to be an uncle who "came to" his nephew, who had found his lair. In this case the body of the "relative" bear was eaten.[25] The cult of the bear was well preserved among the Ket, for whom it was a uniquely powerful manifestation of the "cult of personality".

Contemporary honouring of the bear is even more clearly exemplified by the neighbours of the Ket tribe, the Khant and Mansi, who in ancient literature were renowned as the Ostyak and Vogul. Despite repeated banning by the authorities, they have preserved their traditional ritual festival of the bear, linked with the hunting season. An essential part of this festival is the masked dances, representing the "visit" by various animals to the master of the forest. The festival is therefore known as the Bear Dance. In former times these dances took place in a large communal building and lasted for four or five nights, according to the value of the soul of the person and the slaughtered bear, and the merry-making ended at three o'clock in the morning. The next evening the bear dances and costumed presentations continued until seven the following morning, after which, in the evening, the participants all shared in the eating of the bear meat.[26]

Another bear-day celebration known to this author took place on 11 May 1970 in the Khant village of Korliki, not far from the new oil-industrial city of Nizhnevartovsk. This also took place in the home of a young hunter. This time the dead beast was a she-bear, which according to the master of ceremonies was the wife of the elder Lar-iki who was present at the ceremony. The bear herself had "told" all this and her "words" were not doubted, especially since the real wife of Lar-iki, who had died several years previously, had given birth to twins, and so had the slaughtered she-bear. At the end of the obligatory ritual, during which one of the protagonists feigned sleep near the body of the bear, and another depicted the struggle of the bear and the chipmunk, the hunters set about the preparation of the meat in a huge cooking-pot. At the end of the meal the bones were collected and taken out into the forest, but the skull remained behind as the property of the hunter who had discovered the bear's lair.[27]

The cult of the bear has also survived tenaciously among the Tunguz people of Siberia, whose bear festival dating from the Stone Ages has suddenly found itself in the present atomic age. This is forcibly brought home by the fact that the Even of Magadan region hold their ceremonies not far from the site of the Bilibino atomic power station. On one occasion an Even teacher, who in the summer of 1961 had been sent into the tundra to eliminate illiteracy among the reindeer-breeders, took part in the festive day. It is not certain whether this teacher succeeded in teach-

ing her fellow-tribesmen to read *Pravda,* but it is certain that that summer she took her place by the fire where they were cooking the bear-meat, and that there she became acquainted for the first time with the language of her people's ancient ritual. One old woman, the mother of one of the herdsmen, took a piece of bear-meat from the cooking-pot, but before handing it to the teacher, she pulled a little morsel from the piece and threw it into the fire, saying, "Take this gift from the Evenk who has received a university education!" The girl was on the point of eating the meat, when she was told, "You must not bite and chew the meat with your teeth — you must cut off small pieces with a knife and swallow them whole. That is how we eat the meat of the *amik* (*batyushka* — father)". The remarkable thing was that these words were spoken by a Russian livestock specialist, much respected by the Evenk for his knowledge and observance of their customs.[28] At the end of the ritual feast, after the bear's bones had been buried, the teacher managed to say her piece. She could not deliver the atheist lecture as her instructions doubtless bade her to do; she restricted herself to recounting the major events in the life of the USSR and the rest of the world. Did she realise that her attentive audience included not only the reindeer-breeders but also the spirit of the fire and the spirit of the bear?

Of course this festival (*urkachak*) was not conducted in accordance with all the strict requirements of ancient tradition. Time had modernised it. This is shown not only by the curtailment of duration of the ceremony and the simplification of the customs, but also by the fact that there were Russians and women present, even during the final rite of burying the bear's bones, which would have been quite unthinkable in former times.

In the tradition of another Tunguz people, the Nanay (Gold) who live on the tributaries of the Amur river, the archaic elements of the bear festival have been much better preserved. Here even the bear hunt itself involves real ritual. The hunters, having found the animal, caw like crows. When they are approaching the village, their kinsmen greet them with responding calls — the bear is supposed to believe that crows, and not people, have killed him. The festival itself (*purasi*) begins with treating the bear's head to various ritual delicacies, and ends with the burying of all the bear's bones in a hollow in a tree.[29]

Among the Tunguz people it is more usual to hang the skull of the slaughtered bear on a solitary tree in the taiga. Sometimes bear skulls can be seen in the villages themselves. The Moscow ethnographer V. Tugolukov saw a bear's skull at the top of a pole erected right in the centre of the village of Dzhigda in Khabarovsk province. This "sculpture", executed in "concrete realism" style, depicting the true chief of the Evenk living there, evidently replaced the obligatory statue of Lenin, or at least, rivalled it.[30]

The Nivkh also still observe the bear festival. The greatest expert on

the Nivkh, Ye. Kreinovich, writes that in the 1930s they were still "the mostly strongly committed religious observers of all the contemporary [Siberian] peoples".[31] The Nivkh had far more difficulty in preserving their precious traditions than the other Siberian peoples, for two reasons. In the first place, in order to conduct their bear festival they had to capture a bear cub and rear it for several years. Secondly, the Nivkh ritual cycle takes a considerable length of time. Their bear festival was therefore always easily noticed by the local authorities who were opposed to the native religion. However, even in the late 1960s, in a few villages the Nivkh were still holding their bear festival in accordance with the ancient laws.

One of these festivals is described by the Nivkh ethonographer, Chuner Taksami. He was taken to the village of Krasovka, on the bank of the Amur river, and stayed there for about two months. The owner of the bear began the festival in January 1957, when their bear cub attained its third year. The first cycle of customs, known as *mat' narkh* (which can be translated as "a little reception for visitors") lasted 18 days. It commenced with the feeding of the "local chief" with ritual dishes, for which purpose a meal had been arranged for him in the forest, then the bear was taken for the first time into the home of his keeper, and for a walk around the village. The finale of this cycle was the ritual slaughter of the bear. According to custom the bear's keeper conferred this honour upon the tribe of his wife's family. They could not kill it with arrows and so it was finally killed by shooting. For several days, visitors from kindred tribes received as presents large pieces of the bear fat and meat, but its bones remained in the home to which it had belonged as one of the household. The second cycle of rites, which lasted even longer, began with a great communal feast for all the participants in the festival, followed by various games each ending with another meal, in which different portions of the bear meat and fat, prepared according to special methods, were eaten with other traditional dishes. At the end of the festival the bear's keeper took aside all the elders and treated them to the cooked meat from the bear's head, heart, and the fat from the belly, which are taboo for the young. The keeper of the bear retained for himself the skull, which he placed in a special "temple", with the skulls of other, previously slaughtered bears. The festival closed with the sacrifice of dogs whose heads were hung on the trees around the "temple" containing the bears' skulls; the guts were scattered in the forest and the meat was roasted for a final communal feast.

This festival was extremely costly for the keeper of the bear. He spent all the money he had made from the sale of 17 sable foxes, and three thousand roubles (three hundred roubles in new money) which he had earned at the collective farm fish factory. In addition, his close relatives donated a further nine thousand (nine hundred) roubles.[32]

It must be understood that the Nivkh spared themselves no expense to finance their precious traditions. It should also be understood that in Siberia the bear remains a dangerous rival to Lenin, that the people of Siberia do not in fact believe in the mighty power of the Leader of the Revolution, and that for them the ideology of the bear is far more authentic and attractive than that of communism. Realising this, the Soviet authorities continued to struggle in their own way with the bear.

Soviet Counter-Festivals

In 1966 the USSR Academy of Sciences organised a special conference in the Buryat capital, Ulan-Ude, on the theme "Questions of overcoming the survivals of the past in the life and consciousness of the people, and the establishment of new rites, customs and traditions among the Siberian peoples". The participants included specialists in social science, and party, society and Komsomol (Young Communist League) representatives. One of the seventy conference papers was devoted to the bear festival. The author of this paper was outspokenly in favour of the abolition of this festival which "reflected all the manifestations of the earliest forms of religion". Why? Firstly, because in his opinion, "this festival clearly shows the pronounced character of nationalist isolationism and chiefly in this lies its hostility towards contemporary reality." (This reality is Tyumen region where the representatives of ten Soviet nationalities work in the gas and oil industries.) "In these conditions, the bear festival cannot help, but only hinder, the growth of an internationalist society." Secondly, the author of the paper, in conformity with Soviet declarations on time and space, was concerned because "the festival remains a poetic art, which should never be permitted to stray out of line. A bear is killed — they organise dances. And if in one winter they kill ten, fifteen? What then?" And thirdly and finally, the party propagandist was shocked by "the conservatism of the bear festival", which he was sure "does not correspond to the present level of development of the statehood, economy and culture of the small nations of the north Ob basin". "In conditions of developed socialism," he went on, "celebrations in honour of the bear — 'Lord of the taiga', 'wise prophet', 'spiritual judge', should be seen as, at the very least, a mockery of the present masters of our province, who are the Khant and Mansi."[33]

Once they had grasped that the native traditions and native religion would not disappear however many bans were decreed, the party authorities were determined to dissolve them by means of ideologically-based Soviet festivals. One of these was initiated in the old Nivkh village of Nogliki, on the Sakhalin river. A special committee consisting of "distinguished fishermen and reindeer-breeders, party, soviet and economic workers", was set up to run this festival, which was to take place on 29 February 1968, under the title — loudly proclaimed by *Pravda* — "The

festival of the peoples of the North". The four delegations sent to attend the festival from the four regions of Sakhalin were each headed by the secretary of the regional or city party committee, or the chairman of the regional executive committee. The programme of this well-ordered celebration, which allowed for no spontaneity whatsoever, included: a parade by a column of demonstrators; accounts of the fulfilled industrial plans; and a concert by amateur artists. The highlight of the programme, according to the official account, was the performance by the "Snowball" ensemble from the "East" collective farm, who in their composition "Under the sun of our motherland", showed our people's path from the old realm of fear and wicked spirits, to the new, free and joyful life under the Soviet system.

In order to bring more national colour to this Soviet festival, the organisers decided to include a bear. They found a bear very easily in one of the Nivkh villages. The *Pravda* correspondent eulogised: "The presence of the 'Lord of the Festival', and his walk through the village delighted all those present, great and small." But the remarkable thing was that, in fact, the bear's Nivkh keeper, Ekich, was at first unwilling to give his bear because someone had told him that it would be killed; Ekich said that the bear had been living in his household for only two years, and according to Nivkh tradition, was not yet old enough to be killed. After he was assured that it would be returned to him alive, Ekich agreed to hand over the bear.[34] Clearly, after another year the bear was killed in the ancient Nivkh festival without any mention of the event in *Pravda* and without the participation of party functionaries.

The attempt to eliminate the bear festivals was also launched in western Siberia. Here the party ideologues introduced the notion that "what makes the nationhood of the small nations of the North — is not ancient history, but that which makes up the present essence and way of life of socialist nations and peoples."[35] Therefore, the "rituals which had outlived their era" were replaced by new ones with "atheist and socialist content", which were given the impressive title "Olympiads". "International collectives of workers" comprising representatives from all the republics of the USSR who had travelled to Siberia hoping for better wages, were invited to these Olympiads. At the Olympiads the "results of the producing collectives" were judged and then amateur concerts and sporting events were held.

It is interesting that the date chosen for the new festivals in this region was 23 February — the date commemorating the birth of the Soviet army and navy.[36] It seems probable to this writer that this date was chosen with the aid of a little ethnography. The greatest expert on the culture of the Urals, V. Chernetsov, wrote that the Khant and Mansi formerly held their "council sessions" on the bank of the Ob river, after the winter solstice, and held their bear rituals over the following two months.[37] Among

several Turkic tribes of western Siberia the month beginning in the middle of February was called *ayig,* that is, "month of the bear", since it marked the beast's first venture out of its lair and the beginning of the warm season.[38] So when the Soviet ideologues chose 23 February as the date of their Olympiads, they were implicitly sanctifying it in the name of the bear. The elements of the old bear rites were permitted to appear in the new a-religious Olympiads as national dances, featuring in the concerts for the workers from the gas and oil industry of Tyumen' region.

But in spite of all this, and in spite of the fact that the first Olympiads were taking place as early as 1935 and 1936, they could not stamp out the eternal bear festivals which, as we have seen, continued to succeed in taking place among the ethnic minorities of western Siberia. The persistent conservatism of such archaic rituals in a country of "developed socialism" and "scientific communism" may seem even more incredible than the conversion to Christianity by a sector of Soviet youth who have grown up in atheist surroundings and been brought up by communist families. What are the reasons for the tenacious survival of the bear festivals and the cult of the bear?

Why has the cult of the bear survived?

To answer this question we need first of all to remind ourselves of the feeble Christianisation of the Siberian peoples, since the Russian church in general devoted rather little effort to spreading their idea of the Gospel among these people. When, after the revolution, the Bolsheviks began their repression of Orthodoxy, the few churches in Siberia were rapidly and almost entirely liquidated. It is true that a number of Orthodox priests appeared in Siberia at that time, but they were sent off to their deaths in concentration camps. The Soviet authorities also physically eliminated several powerful and active shamans. All this led to greater status being accorded to those customs and rites whose fulfilment was not required by the church's "infrastructure" or by the presence of shamans. It should be said that the shamans did not play any active role, and indeed scarcely had the right to participate in the bear festivals. Consequently they, like the Orthodox priests, were opposed to these festivals, so it is understandable that in the prevailing conditions the bear cult not only did not disappear, but on the contrary gained in strength.

Secondly, one must keep in mind the vastness of the Siberian territory and the sparsity of its Russian population. The lack of roads and means of transport reduced the possibility of contact between the different scattered ethnic groups and the hostile authorities. The isolation of some of these groups was only recently broken. In the central Kolyma basin, for example, two large groups of Evens were wandering freely until 1959; they were reindeer breeders who "lived by the ancient customs and tradi-

tions of their ancestors, outside the influence of the Soviet organs — they were unaware of the collective farm system, did not associate with their kinsmen who worked there."[39] It is ironic that these people found their haven in Magadan district — the epicentre of the Gulag. But it is a fact that in the early 1930s these Even, led by their trusted shamans, took their herds (over five thousand head of reindeer) into the desert and inaccessible mountain regions of the taiga and lived there undiscovered by the authorities, and thus did not have to join the collectives.

The society of the Khant and Mansi fishermen and hunters also retained its independence for some considerable time, which demonstrates the unusually strong tenacity of their culture. However, in their case nature itself helped to defend their national identity, since their villages' nomadic camps were surrounded by numerous rivers, lakes and impassable swamps. The Khant and Mansi were in the same situation as the Belorussians and Poles, who, according to a Soviet anecdote of the 1960s, very rarely came out of their forests and swamps, and derailed "fascist" trains according to Stalin's orders because they did not know that the war was long over, and Stalin dead.

Each group naturally lost its independence in the course of the exploitation of Siberia's natural resources. When oil and gas were found on the territory of the Khant or Mansi, new towns sprang up and the ever-changing newcomers would arrive from all corners of the USSR. Serious social and cultural problems arose, which even the Soviet specialists could not alleviate.[40] So the problem grew with the new towns which lacked any historical or spiritual traditions.

All the above shows, as we have seen, that the threat which the "spirit of Revolution" and the "god Lenin" brought to Siberia, did not disappear with the end of a period of forced collectivisation. Nowadays, as the small nations of Siberia are faced with the real threat of extinction, of disappearing without trace among the crowds of newcomers to their territory, flowing with oil and torn up by landrovers — now they are seeking the final means of defence. For them, their only defence can be a return to their past, to their own legends, myths and rituals. Any national organism when faced with a mortal threat seeks salvation in its own past, with its roots beyond the furthest limits of man's history. If this turning to national historical character is also typical even of today's Russian intelligentsia, who see it as the only alternative to the soulless Sovietisation of culture,[41] then one can imagine how much more vital it is to the small nations of the northern USSR. The Russian philosopher, Nikolai Berdyayev, in his work on the meaning of history wrote that

> the earliest beginnings of man's history, his pre-history, is some kind of religious, mythological process. Mythology is the primitive source of the history of man. It is the first chapter of the tale of man's fate on earth.[42]

According to the myths of many of the Siberian nations, the first chapter of their historical fate begins with the Bear, and today, in the process of losing their last possession — their language — they are turning to the ancient myths and rituals which have still not lost their ultimate significance, to find in them the means to preserve their cultural and ethnic purpose. In this lies also the third and most basic reason for the survival of the bear festivals, which serve as a catalyst for the vital processes of a shattered cultural system.

The fourth reason which is a condition for the survival of the cult of the bear in Soviet Siberia, is tied in with the real faith of the people in the transcendent nature of this beast, and in his supernatural powers. Even in regions where the bear festivals disappeared long ago, there still remain other forms of honouring the bear whose name is surrounded by mystery, legend and taboo. In 1975, this author happened to see, in a fur-trader's *yurta** in Tuva, a bear's paw attached to the lintel of the entrance. It symbolised, by the principle of *pars pro toto,* the bear who, to the people of Sayano-Altai, is the "Master of the threshold", guarding those who live within. Belief in the bear as helper is especially strong in Altai region. The local inhabitants to this day attach the paw or claw of a bear to the cradle of a child to protect him from evil spirits. Even adults carry a bear's claw with them, like for example a certain salesman who explained that the bear protected him against evil spirits (revisionists no doubt) and fraud, and generally helped him in his work.[43]

So the Soviet state's ideological war against the hero of Siberian myths and the lord of the taiga, in which all the leaders of the revolution have engaged, has not brought about the desired results. The new Soviet myths, founded on dialectical materialism, appear to be unattractive and therefore precarious. In the end the Chukchee and the other Siberian peoples realised that Lenin really was born of an ordinary Russian woman, and that both his parents were ordinary people.

No doubt the elimination of local forms of national religion and the struggle to make the whole population of the USSR bow down before one divine idol, the state of the dictatorship of the proletariat, is part of the policy laid down by Lenin to stimulate and strengthen the "internationalisation" of culture. But could Lenin have imagined that his successors, having eliminated culture, would instigate a state cult, founded on his body, his name and his ideas, or that he himself would give rise to the madness in the eyes and the foaming at the mouth of those hated "religious ideas", this "inexpressible loathsomeness", "most vile disaster";[44] or that he himself would become an object of worship and would replace all national gods? Could he have imagined that he would even take the place of the bear, lowering himself to religion, that "lowest level of barbarism", as Engels described this "stage of development"?

*A *yurta* is a tent used by nomads in Soviet Central Asia.

All this surely shows the cruel revenge with which life repaid Lenin for his Utopia. The only consolation for Lenin might be that the peoples of Siberia preferred their real bear to him, quickly rejecting the cult of man which he foisted upon them.* And in this respect their "primitive consciousness" showed itself to be more developed than that of the "proletarians" who will stand for hours in a queue in order to enter the subterranean "shrine" in Red Square which houses the whole Soviet world.

Note: see map of Siberia facing pp.

*The absence of any kind of deification of man among the people of Siberia is shown in our doctoral thesis: "Sources for the cult of ancestors. On the materials of the Siberian and Finno-Ugrian peoples." Leningrad 1972.

[1]C. Levi-Strauss, *La Pensée Sauvage.* Paris: Plon, 1961, p. 26.

[2]C. Levi-Strauss, *Anthropologie structurale.* Paris: Plon, 1958, p. 231.

[3]V. I. Lenin, *Doklad Komissii po natsional'nomu i kolonial'nomu voprosam na II Kongresse Kominterna, Polnoye sobraniye sochinenii,* 5th ed., tom 41 (1920), p. 246.

[4]A. L. Kroeber and C. Kluckhohn, "Culture: a critical review of concept and definitions", *Papers of the Peabody Museum,* Harvard, Vol. 46, No. 1 (1952), pp. 43-72.

[5]Boris Chichlo, "L'ours Chamane", *Études Mongoles et Siberiennes,* No. 11 (1980) Paris, pp. 35-111.

[6]K. Ye. Kreinovich, *Yukagirsky yazyk.* Moscow/Leningrad: Izdatel'stvo Akademii nauk SSSR, 1958, p. 268.

[7]L. P. Yakimova, *Mnogonatsional'naya Sibir v russkoi literature.* Novosibirsk: Nauka, 1982, p. 85.

[8]Yu. Shestalov, *Yugorskaya Kolybel'.* Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Molodaya Gvardiya, 1972, p. 45.

[9]I. S. Vdovin, "Priroda i chelovek v religioznykh predstavleniyakh chukchei", *Priroda i chelovek v religioznykh predstavleniyakh narodov Sibiri i Severa.* Leningrad: Nauka, 1976, pp. 235-36.

[10]Tekki Odulok, *Na krainem Severe.* Moscow: 1983, p. 27.

[11]Boris Chichlo, "La Collectivisation en Siberie: un problème de nationalités", *L'experience sovietique et le problème national dans le monde.* Paris: Publications Langues d'O, 1980, pp. 279-307.

[12]*Ibid.* See also note 15.

[13]Boris Chichlo, "The Yukagirs. Past, Present; and Future?", *British Universities Siberian Studies Seminar. Report of the Scott Polar Research Institute, University of Cambridge,* edited by Alan Wood. University of Lancaster: 1983, pp. 18-27.

[14]Boris Chichlo, "L'ethnographie sovietique est-elle une anthropologie?", *Histoire de l'anthropologie: XVI-XIX Siecles.* Texts collected and prepared by B. Rupp-Eisenreich and edited by Klinckseick, Paris: 1984, pp. 247-58.

[15]Boris Chichlo, "Les Nevuqaghmiit ou la fin d'une ethnie", *Etudes/Inuit/Studies,* Vol. 5, No. 2 (1981), Quebec: p. 36.

[16]V. G. Bogoraz, "Ob izuchenii i okhrane okrainnykh narodov", *Zhizn' natsional'nostei,* Vol. 1 (1923), p. 180.

[17]V. G. Bogoraz, "Religiya, kak tormoz sotstroyitel'stva sredi malykh narodnostei Severa", *Sovetsky Sever,* Nos. 1-2 (1932), p. 157.

[18]I. I. Avdeyev, "Dramaticheskiye predstavleniya na medvezhem prazdnike u mansi", *Sovetsky Sever,* Nos. 3-4 (1935), p. 174.

[19]K. Ye. Kreinovich, "Kolkhoznye zametki", *Sovetsky Sever,* Nos. 3-4 (1935), p. 187.

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[21]V. V. Senkevich, "Sovremennost v fol'klare narodov Severa", *Sovetskaya Arktika,* No. 11, 1937, p. 103.

[22]For 1926 and 1959 figures see: B. Chichlo, "Sibérie — miroire de l'URSS", *Sibérie III. Civilisations, cultures, littératures.* Ouvrage publié sous la direction de Boris Chichlo, Cultures et sociétés de l'Est 5, Institut d'Etudes Slaves, Paris, 1985.

[23]D. Smirnov, "Lenin i Stalin v tvorchestve narodov Severa", *Sovetskaya Arktika,* No. 3 (1939), p. 79.

[24]*Lenin v poezii narodov SSSR,* Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Khudozhestvennaya literatura, 1980, p. 449.

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[27]Boris Chichlo, "Travaux sovietiques recents", *Études Mongoles et Sibériennes,* No. 11 (1980), Paris, pp. 55-60. Also, V. M. Kulemzin, "Medvezhi prazdnik u vakhovskikh Khantov", *Materialy po etnografii Sibiri.* Tomsk: Tomsk Universitet, 1972, pp. 93-98.

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[31]K. Ye. Kreinovich, *Nivkhgu.* Moscow: 1973, p. 206.

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[34]C. M. Taksami, "Sovremennye i traditsionnye prazdniki narodov Nizhnego Amura i Sakhalina", *Strany i narody Vostoka,* Vol. 13 (1972), pp. 153-56.

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[41]Boris Chichlo, "Trente années d'ethnographie soviètique", in "Les sciences sociales en URSS", *Revue d'Etudes Slaves,* t. 57, fasc. 2, Paris, 1985.

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