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The True Lineage of “Juan Oso”

ABSTRACT: “Juan Oso,” known as “John the Bear” in the English tradition, is a cohesive narrative, a tale type, with apparent European origins and wide distribution among native communities of the Americas. Here I inspect the thesis that the native American narrative corpus originates in European sources. “Juan Oso” would seem to be the poster child for this argument, but after considering its presence in two New World collections, Robert Lowie’s Assiniboine myths and my own Kamsá mythic narratives, I propose that “Juan Oso” is an outlier, a special case, in an endemic American corpus of tales featuring amorous bears.

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The Inca tales that have come down to us are all either origin myths or historical legends; there is no indication in the chroniclers of the existence of animal fables such as the modern Aymara and Quechua tell. It would be possible to make a very good case for the European origin of these animal fables, on the basis of the distribution of common motives and the silence of all the older writers, but the question is perhaps better left open.

—John Rowe

WHEN TALKING ABOUT a creature half-human and half-bear, issues of lineage inevitably arise. Juan Oso, John the Bear, the off-spring of a union between a male bear and a female human, straddles the divide between human and animal and usually passes as a strong and slightly-to-rather uncouth human being. But in this essay I am less

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concerned with the bear-child than with the wide sweep of mythic narratives about him, which raise their own problems with regard to lineage. "Juan Oso" as told in Spanish America, and "John the Bear," as told in the English-speaking portions of the Americas, highlight the interplay between European and Native American narrative prototypes. Is "Juan Oso" of European descent? If so, does it represent a prevalent trend in Native American narrative, the adoption and naturalizing of European tale elements? Are Native American tale repertoires built upon European foundations? Or does "Juan Oso" bespeak an identity forged in the Americas? How can we go about ascertaining its true lineage? These are the questions I set out to address in this article.

Folktale scholarship has been much concerned with the origin of particular tales and tale repertoires. In the early decades of the twentieth century, folklorists and anthropologists sustained lively debates about the sources of narratives being documented in the United States and Canada among Native Americans and in what was then called Negro populations, that is, populations with significant degree of African descent. There was a rather strong European bias to a good deal of this commentary (Thompson 1919); arguments came from certain quarters to the effect that the tales told in the indigenous communities of the Americas were largely adaptations of European materials, disseminated through contact and reworked in native settings to produce a Europeanized narrative output. Some authorities advanced the view that whatever was coherent in the Native American corpus must have come from Europe, since New World "savages" and "primitives" could not be expected to generate sensible much less artistic narratives. As the opening quote from John Rowe attests, a thesis of European origin also gained traction among scholars working in native South America.

By the middle of the twentieth century, counter-arguments were being proposed underscoring the autochthony and integrity of New World narrative traditions and also stressing the importance of Africa as a point of origin (Crowley 1962; Dundes 1965; Herskovits 1958). A summary of these debates can be found in Alan Dundes's article, "African Tales among the North American Indians," published in the *Southern Folklore Quarterly* in 1965 and reprinted in his edited volume, *Mother Wit from the Laughing Barrel* (1973). As Dundes notes, the eminent folklorist and anthropologist, Franz Boas, joined the debate to

argue that most of the animal trickster stories found among American Indians "are of Spanish provenience" (1940: 519). Later, in the closing decades of the twentieth century, theories emphasizing creolization and cultural hybridity largely displaced concerns about origins (Abrahams 1983; Kapchan 1993). In this paper, I seek to resurrect an interest in issues of tale lineage, without discarding the insights that creolization and hybridity bring to the discussion.

I do not intend to replay the storied debates on tale origins in the Americas, a rich chapter in American folkloristics; rather, my intention is to zero in on a particular New World tale with strong links to Europe, "Juan Oso" or "John the Bear," and spell out something of what is at stake in how we formulate our approach to its true lineage. I propose here an exercise in the epistemology of narrative origins in which I will argue that we must locate migratory elements in their cultural matrices as well as trace their enticing historical and geographical correlations. My contention is that by first addressing the internal, cultural logic of storytelling resources we place ourselves in a position to better assess the implications of tale borrowing and tale diffusion across time and space.

In order to advance this argument, I will pay close attention to "Juan Oso" in the repertoire of the Kamsá Indians of southwestern Colombia, where I encountered this tale as a component of a living mythology, but I will set the scene by an initial excursus into "John the Bear" as it figures in Stith Thompson's *Tales of the North American Indians* and in the source for his version of the tale, Robert Lowie's *The Assiniboine* (1910). By revisiting Lowie's Assiniboine collection, we can appreciate the cultural-logic that embeds "John the Bear" in an impressive matrix of bear stories; this excursus will, I hope, establish a productive framework for associating the Europe-tinged "Juan Oso" with its companion bear-stories in Kamsá mythology. Additional outcomes include appreciating pervasive tendencies in the New World and Old World narrative corpuses and plumbing the conceptual mechanics activated when distinctive narrative traditions interact.

Let me establish a crucial divide in the narrative materials from the outset. New World narrative traditions feature two kinds of bear stories. In one set of tales, bear is an oafish, comic player; the Kamsá tales indicate this presence through use of the nominal marker *-be*, which marks round objects. Thus, *osobe* is a rounded, slow, and humorous figure, often presented as the *gobernador* or governor of the *cabildo*, the tribal council, who will be duped by the livelier trickster, either rabbit

or squirrel (McDowell 1994). The other set of tales features a powerful adversary in the natural world who takes a perverse interest in human affairs and indeed frequently seeks to have affairs with human females. There is nothing humorous about this bear figure, who can carry out great acts of destruction on the spur of the moment. My concern in this essay is with these bears playing in tales of seduction, rather than with their oafish cousins, the bears featured in the trickster tales.

Stith Thompson's "John the Bear"

The twentieth century's pre-eminent folktale scholar, Stith Thompson, cut his folkloristic teeth, so to speak, on the interaction of European and Native American narratives. In 1919 Thompson wrote a Colorado College thesis on the topic of *European Tales among the North American Indians*, and in 1929 he published an ample collection of texts, with exhaustive annotations, under the title *Tales of the North American Indians*. His views on tale origins are commendably balanced, displaying on the one hand a high regard for European influences and on the other a realization that North American Indian tribes did possess a unique narrative heritage of their own. His recognition of European influence comes through in his dissertation materials, especially in regard to his treatment of trickster tales featuring animal protagonists and in his anthology of North American Indian tales, where he notes that "not fewer than fifty well-known European tales are present among the American Indians" (1929:xx) and where he includes two chapters, the two final ones, containing tales allegedly of European origin: Chapter VIII is titled "Tales Borrowed from Europeans" and has fifteen stories; Chapter IX is titled "Bible Stories" and contains four examples. It is notable that he places these materials at the end of his collection, and that, in assessing the North American Indian corpus in general, he states that "the body of older American Indian tales is very clearly established" (1929:xxii) and that, where borrowing is present, "the Indians recognize these definitely as borrowings" (1929: xx). In Chapter VIII, tale XXXIX (39) is titled "John the Bear," and I want to turn our attention now to that specific example.

The story Stith Thompson labels "John the Bear" in his 1929 collection of texts comes from Robert Lowie's *The Assiniboine*, published in 1910 in *The Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History*. It opens with the familiar "John the Bear" plot elements—a

woman is abducted in the summer by a bear who keeps her in his cave till the next spring; she has given birth to a son who has mixed bear and human characteristics, hence John the Bear, though in this telling, the woman was already pregnant by her human husband; nonetheless, something of the bear's prowess wears off on him, as he acquires the super-human strength typical of John the Bear, the bear's son; eventually, at the son's urging, mother and son escape and return to her people; the bear comes in pursuit but is killed; and, finally, the son comes of age among the people, showing signs of prodigious strength. At some point the young man gathers companions about him and sets off for adventure. In the story Thompson has taken from Lowie's Assiniboine collection, the young man is named Icmá, meaning "Plenty of Hair," in recognition of his mixed physical features. The narrating of Icmá's subsequent adventures takes no further notice of his bear-like qualities; they read as a series of episodes in which the hero triumphs over adversities and adversaries, gaining spiritual power and at last winning the chief's three daughters as wives.

The anthologized "John the Bear" is an engaging tale in its own right, and one feels that Stith Thompson did well to include it in his collection of North American Indian tales. But a journey back to his source, to Lowie's Assiniboine study, is instructive on many levels. Robert Lowie was born in 1883 in Vienna but came to the United States as a ten-year-old boy and developed interests ranging from literature to philosophy. Later, he came under the spell of his teacher, Franz Boas, at Columbia University, who won his services for folkloristics (he was editor of the *Journal of American Folklore* in 1917 and 1918) and anthropology. He served as assistant curator at the American Museum of Natural History before taking up a position as professor of anthropology at Berkeley in 1921, a position that he occupied until his retirement in 1950. Lowie became known as the leading authority on Plains Indian society, working with several tribes there including the Assiniboine, a Siouan people resident in the northern plains of the United States and adjacent areas of Canada. Indeed, his 270-page ethnography of the Stoney Assiniboine of Alberta Province, Canada, based on fieldwork carried out over seven weeks in 1907, there and at Fort Belknap, Montana, is among the first of his many exhaustive studies centered on Plains Indian peoples.

Lowie's Assiniboine study contains eighty tale-texts presented in a section titled "Mythology." As was the custom of the time, these texts are offered in English prose without any of the contextual or ethnopoetic features we would anticipate today. (There are, however, four texts in Assiniboine with interlinear translations printed in an appendix.) Lowie's objective, following the teaching of Boas, was to document tale-content so that cultural beliefs and practices could be assessed and areal patterns adduced. In fact, Lowie's primary finding regarding Assiniboine mythology is that it evinces scant connection to the Siouan heritage and that it owes rather more to "the recent influence of contact with other tribes" (1910:100).

Opening Lowie's study and seeking the source text for Thompson's "John the Bear," the first revelation is that there is no "John the Bear" listed among Lowie's eighty Assiniboine texts. Closer inspection finds that the tale Thompson extracted is number six in a sub-section called, "Miscellaneous Tales," given the title in Lowie of "The Underground Journey" (1910:147). This title, most likely conferred by Lowie, derives from the middle portion of the tale where the hero sets out upon his adventures; one of these involves dropping down into the underworld to rescue the chief's three daughters. It would appear that Stith Thompson, steeped in the European material, took the initiative to stamp the label "John the Bear" on this Assiniboine tale and assimilate it to the European-derived segment of North American Indian narrative. But Thompson's move here is facilitated by Lowie's annotation to "The Underground Journey": Lowie calls this story "A European tale" and points to the 1864 work by J. G. von Hahn (a fellow Austrian) on Greek and Albanian Märchen. In addition to this note, Lowie points to Shoshone (from his own work) and Omaha parallels (from the work of the Episcopalian missionary James Owen Dorsey). Thompson, in turn, lists in footnote 290 to his collection several Native American analogues from sites in Canada, the United States, and Mexico.

There is another significant revelation to be had in consulting Thompson's source material in Lowie's 1910 study. It turns out that Assiniboine mythology is populated with bear protagonists deeply implicated in human affairs. Here is a partial listing:

Tale 23: "The Bear Woman." A male bear mates with a human female who then becomes a tough killer (1910:179).

- Tale 32: "The Grizzly and His Ward." A male bear and a human boy hang out amicably until the bear is killed by the boy's relatives, leaving the boy in sadness (190).
- Tale 33: "The Grateful Bear." A woman takes a stick out of a male bear's paw; the bear warns her to avoid the first group of people she meets on the way home (191).
- Tale 34: "The Young Bear." A human female obtains a male bear cub; later, this cub abducts her and she bears him a cub; eventually, the woman and her cub escape and the bear is killed; as in "John the Bear," this cub proves to be too strong for his own good; he goes off to live with a mature male bear (191-2).
- Tale 35: "The Bear Wife." A chief's son "embraces" (this is the euphemism used by Lowie; at least we don't have Latin here, his solution for rendering explicitly sexual language) a she-bear he meets by a trail; she produces a child who becomes a powerful helper (193).

Clearly, for the Assiniboine, bears are good to *think with*, to adapt the felicitous phrasing Claude Lévi-Strauss uses in his treatment of totemism (Lévi-Strauss 1963:69). The tale that Thompson culled from Lowie and renamed "John the Bear" is properly understood as one in a whole complex of narratives plumbing the intimate and often dangerous relationship between humans and bears, species that often compete for food and territory. Transposing these competitions to the plane of sexuality seems capricious at first, but then, we have witnessed in recent years problems menstruating women have encountered in wilderness areas populated by bears; perhaps there is a biological basis, after all, to these sexual fancies. In any case, the question now arises: what are the Assiniboine using bears to think about? There are many possible answers to this question, and I will have the luxury of addressing only one of them here. The direction I want to take in my analysis is foreshadowed in the words spoken by the Assiniboine Bear Wife as she entrusts her half-human cub to its father. Growling in the manner of a bear, she instructs him as follows (1910:193):

"This is your son. Keep him. If he had fur like mine, I would take care of him; but as his flesh is like yours, *you* may do so. When old enough, he will aid you by his mysterious powers. He will secure for you horses and scalps, and you will become a great chief. I have given him all my power. I am not coming back anymore."

The Kamsá “Juan Oso”

Like the Assiniboine of the northern Great Plains, the Kamsá of southwestern Colombia tell the story of “John the Bear” and do so using the very same basic plot elements. And, for the Kamsá as for the Assiniboine, this tale fits into a broader complex of stories featuring bears seeking intimacy with humans. As I noted previously, Kamsá mythic narratives also feature amusing, oafish bears, but I restrict my attention here to the powerful bear figure we find in “John the Bear.” Still, a hint of the bear’s comic potential will surface even in this more serious portion of the corpus. I will reference three Kamsá bear stories: “Juan Oso” and “Alegra Osobiana” (The Lively Bear) as performed by Francisco Narváez and “Osobiana” as performed by my pre-eminent Kamsá storyteller, Mariano Chicunque. From this matrix of seductive bears, we will expand our purview to a series of thematically linked tales, all concentrating on animal suitors, in order to gain a vantage point on the true lineage of “Juan Oso.”

The “Juan Oso” story that I recorded from the performance of Francisco Narváez is for all practical purposes interchangeable with Lowie’s Assiniboine version, that is, the initial segment telling of the bear-child’s origins—with the notable exception that in this Kamsá version, the child is unequivocally the product of a male bear-human female sexual union. This performance occurred in late afternoon at the end of a day’s work in the fields; the *peones* or workers had gathered at the hosts’ house for “a drop” of *bokoy*, the home-brewed maize beer. As people sat on the benches along the walls of the home’s sitting room, Francisco Narváez began his story. I offer below the text I produced from this performance, with ample assistance from my Kamsá host family, in the original Kamsá and in a fairly free English translation.

TEXT 1: “Juan Oso” (“John the Bear”) as performed by Francisco Narváez, October 1979

i

tempo chká inopasan tajayana inamna

In days gone by it happened that there was a festival.

kanye btsetsata nye tabanoy yojtsoñana tsotmoñama

The parents just went to Sibundoy to join in the drinking.

tobiaxna shanyá shanyá jokedan kanya

The girl stayed behind to look after the house, she stayed behind, alone.

ndeolpna inaboy ch oso chentxe ibojabwache

Suddenly along came the bear, he paid a visit there.

ibojtseingañe ibojtsanbañe tsjwan ch betiyexoka tambo inaboprontán

He fooled around with her and took her with him, climbing a tree he prepared a shelter for her.

chata ibojtseyeneyen

Those two became established.

i ya pues achkas katakwente ibojtseyen

And then, well, like a married couple they established themselves.

ii

chokna ya xokayujtsemena shembasa ya xoká xexona kukwatxiñe

Then she became sick, that girl, then sick with a child in hand.

yase ch boyá ch osna jtsanana ch familiangabenach jotbebama twamba ndasoye

Then that husband, that bear, he went among the community to rob hens or anything else,

i ch xoká jtsekwedaná

and he took care of the sick one.

i ya yojatetsebaná orna ch kachabe yentxayá tsabojabonám

And then she got up, then she went to wash his clothes.

i ch buyeshna mwentxe jtsabkukanám i ch tabanoye yojtsebokanamna

And the water there gushed and flowed toward Sibundoy.

tonday lisensia shembasana nye kachentxe kachentxe jtsemenama

Without any permission that girl, alone, alone, she was.

i asna xexona mbuna yojtsobochaye

And then with the child, quickly she ran.

chana kanyoikna krischanka inyoikna kach oská

He was on one side a human being, on the other like a bear.

chká wabonaná i choro so ve

Like that, fierce and curly, you see? (laughs)

yojtsobochaye

She ran.

iii

i así chana nye bien jwesbomina yojtsejakán jwisio yojtsejakanamna

And so he came of age, he gained judgment, he grew up fine.

chore ibojatjaye bebmaftaka ibojenekwentá

Then he inquired of his mother and she told him:

akabe taitana animal komna oso komna

“Your father is an animal, he is a bear.

chan ndoñe krischianika

He is not a human being.

achkasna xjetsabokna atxebe btsetsangabioka ndoñe lisensia kenatsmena

For him I left my parent’s home, there being no permission.

atxena jtsanám akabe taitan bayuj

I went with your father, a beast.”

chorna ch wakiñana bebmafiyoe txabá yojtsayañe bebmafiyoe yojtsayañe txabá

Then that son spoke well to his mother, he spoke well to her:

entonces atxebe taitan chaotsoñe saná tjayentxe jangwangán

“So my father has gone for food, he is looking for it in the mountains.

kejtsoñe ora chorna mamaftakna mwentxana boischañe

While he is gone, now with mother let’s flee from here,

lijero tabanoy buchjetsebokna

quickly we must leave for Sibundoy.”

i serto chká txamo ibojeniankana

And truly like that he spoke to her.

serto oso yojiyá ch bngabenache krischiangabenache jiyondebiayama saná

Truly the bear went among us, among us human beings, to steal food.

ya

Well.

iv

i chora chatana betsko ibojtsachañika tabanoye ibojenakmiye ibojachá chatena

And then those two quickly ran to Sibundoy, they fled, they ran, the two of them.

i ch osna yojtashjango sanangaka
And that bear arrived with lots of food.

chor ndoknay shema ndokna xexon
Then there was nothing of the woman, nothing of the child.

chor ungetsetxenán chjena yojotjajo shukwatxe ibojwastoto
Then smelling them he ran, he followed the track.

i asta pronto tabanoka yojetsebokna
And before long he appeared at Sibundoy.

chana chokna antes kaban ibundashjanga orna chokna limpe yojetsobwambaye
There, before he finally appeared, she completely warned them,

a los soldados o que serán de ese skopetaxangak
those soldiers, or who were they with those rifles?

v

ibojatmanga imojwanyaye chbiama ch bebta juan oso
They waited, they protected them from that father of Juan Oso,

ch chan kabandonse wabayná
though he still hadn't been baptized yet.

ndayá ch oso ch bebta imojtsetabaye bebtaj imojtsetabaye
What, that bear, the father, they killed him, they killed that father,

ora cha skopetaxaka imojtsoba
then with their rifles they brought him down.

i chorkokayé libre ch wakiñatema bebmana libre
And then surely the son was free of his father, the mother free.

i chorsa ch wakiñana tabanokna imojwabaye que llamó juan oso wakiña
And then in Sibundoy they baptized that son, they called him Juan, son of the bear.

vi

i chorna chentxana yojtsobochaye mobuna jwisio yojtsejakana
And then they had run from there, quickly he came of age.

skweloy imojomashingo tabanoy lempe imojabestia
He entered school in Sibundoy dressed completely like a person,

imojwabayentxana i skwele imojemashingo
he dressed in clothes and entered school.

i ch kanyebé nyetxá podeskebé yojtsenajwabna nyetxá podeskebé yojtsenajwabna

And that fellow was very ugly, he was all mixed together, ugly, he was all mixed together.

lo de mase baseñamalunga ndoñe kas imentsebomina

The other little rascals didn't take him seriously.

kaftsoburlañika jtsoburlañingana

They made fun of him, they teased him.

i chorna ch ermanebeñe jombwambayana mntxá

And then the Catholic Brother spoke to them like this:

xmojtseborlana i el bueno

"You make fun of him, and he thinks:

atxena chantsawanta kexmuntatawanta atxebe añemna kach kuntxamo

'I will put up with it, I hope I can stand it, my strength is too much.

atxe tsojatatxenana

I didn't lose my temper."

kaban nye ndoñe kaso imontsebomna

Still they didn't pay any attention.

asna yojwbambaye ndoñe kaso montsebomentxana

Then he advised them: "You'd better pay attention."

yojwbambay pronta ermanebeñe yojakastegakasa

He advised them, right away, the Brother punished them.

nye ndoñe ndojinyinga nye kaftsoburlañika chbé jtseborlanán

But they didn't have compassion, they just made fun of him, they teased him.

chentxan nemo erman ndoñe kaso imontsebomnentxan

From there they didn't pay attention to the Brother:

nye pronta jaoprobamna chabe añema

"Soon you will taste his strength."

tojanoprobay

They tasted it.

nye batatema chana jatsuntxana tempo chana obaná jaotxenamaka

He just gave one of them a little punch, right away he was dead, he struck one of them,

muerto con la fuerza de él
dead by the strength of his arm.

chentxana imojtsewatjanaka ndoñe mejor kachkay imojonyaye
After that they feared him, no, they had better let him be.

vii

skweloye libre yojabokna i chorna chana inyana ndayá wabayina
Free from school, he left, and then with another, what was his name?

pero utatsa tsunditatxumbo
But I am sure they were two.

ibojá a la guerra ch juan oso y con el otro chbiama ndoñe tsutsabowinyana
He went to war, that Juan Oso with the other fellow whose name I can't recall.

i otro tambien kantsubtay imojbema pero mayoralna juan osoka
And there were also seven others, but the oldest was Juan Oso,

mayorna mas mayorna ndayá podeskabé
the oldest, older, and so ugly!

i choka ch moikan kanya txamo soplomolina i kastellanamakanak
And there they had some Spanish artillery.

chiekna el otro i ch mayor i ch utata nyenga kansubta imojtsebukañe
Therefore the other fellow and that older one, those two, only those seven came out of there.

choka imojtsanjanga mallajkta gente imojtsebatman skopetaxangak
There they came against many people, they killed them with their rifles.

choka ch jenapelian ch con el juan oso
There they were fighting with that Juan Oso.

oh ch kastellanamakanana yojtsangwebjoy
Oh, that artillery made them fly,

nyan nye twambebe plumashaka yojtsangwebubjoy la gente
just like the feathers of a hen the people were flying.

nye chan kansubta imojtsebukañamina
Only those seven came out of there.

chorna nye gracia yojtsemna ch mallajkta imojtsemenungena gracia yojtsemna
Then they were just laughing, there were so many of the enemy, they were laughing.

kachká mujemungena imochjatsungana

Like that there were so many of them.

pero chungá imojtsoganañe lempe chubta jente yojtsapochokaye con soplomolina kastellanamakanak

But they won, they completely finished those people off with the Spanish artillery.

viii

nyetxá tsundatatxumbo

That's all I know of it.

For all the weight of the international tale types, the storyteller thoroughly grounds his tale in the Kamsá cultural context. A flirtatious bear arrives at a home where a daughter has been left behind as a *sh-anya*, that is, as a caretaker while her family goes to town to participate in a festival. The girl is thus vulnerable, and the bear seduces her and takes her away to live with him. The seduction is depicted by repeated utterance of the Kamsá word *ibojtseingañe*, based on the Spanish root *engañar*, to fool or cheat, but carrying the sense of “to fool around with” in English, and prefixed with the Kamsá reciprocity marker, *-bo*, suggesting that this connection was mutually achieved. This reciprocity continues as the bear and the woman take up residence together as husband and wife: the Kamsá expression that is used here, *chata ibojtseneyen*, translates as “the two of them went to live together”: we are still very much in the mode of the reciprocal *-bo*.

Time passes and the enterprising bear-husband goes among the humans to rob hens to feed his now pregnant wife. She gives birth to a child who is described in these terms: “He was one side a human being, on the other, like a bear.” The boy comes of age and his mother informs him as follows:

Your father is an animal, he is a bear.

He is not a human being.

For him I left my parent's home, there being no permission.

I went with your father, a beast.

This Kamsá story plays up the sexual union between human and animal that is the origin of the bear-human child. But in the mother's talk to her child, the animal qualities of her “husband” are now brought into the foreground; she calls him by the Kamsá word for beast, *bayuj*. The phrase, *chan ndoñe krischian*, “he is not a human being,” carries

a significant weight in Kamsá mythology, and we will return to it to assess its import shortly.

It is the boy who proposes to his mother that they flee their sequestered home and return to the people, and the narrator says he "spoke well" in doing so. Mother and son run quickly to Sibundoy; when the bear returns with food for them, he discovers they are gone and following their scent, tracks them to the town. But the woman has warned the people, and they have set up defenses; with rifles they bring him down. We are told that now the mother and the boy are free of the bear. The boy is then baptized; they call him "Juan Oso Wakiña," "Juan, Child of the Bear." Juan Oso is characterized by the narrator as "very ugly, he was all mixed together." He puts on clothes and attends school, but the other fellows make fun of him. The Catholic brother at the school warns the boys not to tease him, but they continue until one day he finally loses his temper and strikes a boy, killing him with one blow. From there, Juan Oso finishes school and takes off into the world. The tale's final episode involves a battle victory in which Juan Oso leads seven comrades against an army; with the help of what is called *kastellanomakanak*, which appears to be some kind of Spanish artillery, Juan and his companions win the day.

Extracting the elements that are indicative of its Sibundoy Valley setting, this "Juan Oso" tale told by Francisco Narváez as the field hands rested at the end of the day's work corresponds in every detail to the Spanish-American prototype. Here are the standard episodes:

1. A bear comes to seduce or carry away by force a human female.
2. They live together and have sexual relations, producing a son.
3. The mother, with her son, escapes the bear's company to rejoin human society.
4. The bear comes after the woman but is destroyed by her companions.
5. The bear-human child is named Juan Oso and has traits derived from both parents, including prodigious strength of arm from his father.
6. Juan Oso strikes and kills children who mock him.
7. He leaves home to have military adventures.

These episodes occur with some variability regarding detail in stories told throughout the New World (Boggs 1930; Hansen 1957; Paredes 1970; Robe 1973.) As we have seen, the Assiniboine have this tale as a narrative armature or framework that recurs within their complex of bear stories. In the Assiniboine tale that Stith Thompson lifted from Robert Lowie's 1910 collection, all of these episodes are present,

minus the one referencing sexual relations, but this feels very much like fudging since the child produced by the woman has prodigious strength that evidently comes from the bear.

We have, then, People's Exhibit A for the impact of the European tale corpus, an argument that can be advanced on three grounds. First, this narrative armature closely parallels familiar European narrative archetypes, notably Thompson's Type 301, "The Three Stolen Princesses," and Type 650A, "Strong John," and could easily be descended from them. Second, the uniformity of this framework across the indigenous Americas suggests that this distribution is the product of contact with a standard tale type and subsequent dissemination in the Americas. Franz Boas (1912:254) notes "the most remarkable distribution of this tale among Western American Indians" and suggests that this distribution is the result of early Spanish contact and later transmission from tribe to tribe. And third, the case for European origin rests as well in the tale's preoccupation with worldly power achieved through military conquest, a theme that is present in both the Kamsá and Assiniboine variants.

If this argument should hold, would it imply that the remainder of the seductive bear stories in the indigenous Americas will yield to a similar account of origin? And should that prove true, don't we have a demonstration that Native American narrative depends heavily on European sources? But hold your horses, it is premature to accept this chain of reasoning in its entirety. I will propose a counter-argument that places "Juan Oso" not at the center but at the periphery of the seductive-bear complex in the Americas. Granting this tale's likely connection to European sources, a different picture can be painted. It begins with the contention that this European original caught the fancy of American peoples precisely because they already possessed a well-developed readiness to *think with* amorous animals in their mythologies. My counter-argument is important not only in revamping the theory of European origin, but also in sharpening our awareness of thematic tendencies distinguishing the European and American tale corpuses.

Kamsá Animal Suitors

As with the Assiniboine, the Kamsá tell multiple stories of amorous or seductive bears, a clue that "Juan Oso" belongs to a larger category of mythic narrative. One of these, "Osobiamá," "About the Bear," was told

by my most proficient Kamsá storyteller, taita Mariano Chicunque in November of 1978. Taita Mariano situates his tale during the feast of Corpus Christi, when the parents would go into the town of Sibundoy for three weeks or even a month, leaving the children behind to look after the house. Mariano lets us know that he witnessed these festivities as a child, before the church abandoned them due to a perception that they opened the door to licentiousness. Mariano describes the visiting bear as man-like, and with some joviality tells about his efforts to recreate in the country the revelry of those who are partying in the town. He ties a seed rattle around his ankle and dances about, saying, "As they are doing in Sibundoy, so I am doing here in the garden." Again mimicking the people in town, he brings out eggs to eat, but instead of placing them on a plate, he cracks them against his forehead; this bear has the general idea, but his imitations are uncouth. He sings the Corpus Christi song, "Korobxstontxe, Korobxstontxe," as he dances, spinning about. We have, in this opening gambit of taita Mariano's tale, an echo of the humorous bear we encounter in Kamsá trickster tales.

But Mariano's tale quickly turns serious. He presents the seduction scene in some detail, framing it with expressions of uncertainty: "How could it be? I know it like this. Fine, I will tell it." Here is Mariano's take on the seduction:

chora chana ibojatontxa jaingeñana ch osona boyá oso inamna

Then he began to fool around with her, that bear husband, a bear he was.

yojontxá jayingeñana shemaka

He began to fool around with that woman.

iyé ch shema chkasa yojowena ch osoftaka

And that woman listened to that bear.

i chká ibojtsobwachjangwa ch umanidad

And like that they came together to make love.

Now described as a bear, not a man, he succeeds in seducing the young woman; the act of intercourse or copulation is consensual. He then carries her away into the mountain and looks after her, as in the version by Francisco Narváez. But in Mariano's version, a human male finds her along a mountain stream, washing clothes, and she counsels him to return for her, but in the meantime, to put up ten fences and have the soldiers ready with rifles.

In this version, the bear returns and immediately knows what has happened; with one stroke, he tears their child in two and then pursues the woman with the intent to kill her too. In a rage he approaches the town and tears his way through four fences before the bullets finally bring him down. To put an end to him, the people have to come at him with clubs and club him to death. Mariano concludes his tale with the observation, "Those bears were like that in the old days, they liked to seduce women." Despite the plot similarities between "Osobiama" and the "Juan Oso" story, there is a crucial difference: in "Osobiama" the bear-human child theme is stifled. Yes, there is live off-spring from this union, but the story leaves the bear-child unnamed and conveys his destruction as very much a side-line; the storyteller's emphasis is on the antics of the dancing bear, at the outset, then the peculiar sexual union of male bear and human woman, and at last, the killing of the raging bear at the outskirts of town.

Let me mention one other Kamsá bear story, "Alegra Osobiama," told by Francisco Narváez in December of 1978. Once again an amorous bear arrives where a young woman is looking after the house while her parents are in town at a fiesta. But this time the woman is clever and manages to resist and defeat the bear's intentions. This bear starts cooking up some eggs and prepares a sauce to go with them, saying, "Like this in Sibundoy they are eating." Like Mariano's bear, he ties seed rattles around his legs and commences to dancing. But he betrays a key piece of information, by singing: "I fear nothing at all, only the rattlesnake I fear." The young woman, who has hidden herself in the attic, hears this and contrives a plan: she ties a long woven belt to a weaving needle and drops it on the bear's head. As the belt uncoils about his legs, the bear is convinced a snake has set upon him, and he dashes out of the house, the seed rattles still attached, never to return there. As in Mariano's "Osobiama," this lively bear has humorous attributes. But he remains a source of real anxiety and hence stands apart from the bear of the trickster cycle.

The constant element across these Kamsá bear stories is the seductive intent of the bear, who wishes to mate with a human female. This core element argues for assimilating these bear stories to a larger category of Kamsá myths, tales of animal suitors. It is this analytical move that will enable us, at last, to assess the true lineage of Juan Oso. As it happens, the arrival of animal suitors to the homes of marriageable young men and women is a central theme in Kamsá mythology, tied, I

have argued elsewhere, to the bittersweet moral of paradise forestalled (McDowell 2007). I have encountered a dozen or so stories of this kind in the Kamsá repertoire, and the overarching lesson is that, whatever gifts these animal suitors might come bearing, they must be rejected from the human family. And these gifts can be substantial: the owl-man could clear a patch of forest just by calling out across the land; the shulupsi-woman could brew maize beer from just a few grains of corn; the centipede woman could turn herself into food. Each of these creatures sought entry into human families through marriage, but each was sent away due to their uncouth manners and mannerisms.

Typical is María Juajibioy's telling of "Tobixbe Parlo," which I call "The Centipede's Tale." Here is the text and translation I have created from María's performance, again with help from members of my host family:

TEXT 2: "Tobixbe Parlo" ("The Centipede's Story") as performed by María Juajibioy, October, 1978

i

kanye tobixbe inashjango bobonsbiamaka

A young woman arrived at the home of a young man.

i ch wamben mama jaboknán ibojauyan

And that intended mother-in-law said to her:

xkatjesaboye jenaxaka

"Come plant *barbacuano* seed."

i ch bebinkwa jabokná ibnetsjwañe

And that intended daughter-in-law answered her:

xwatsetsejaja jomuxenaka

"I myself will become *barbacuano*."

asna bibixá xmetsabojeka

Then: "Plant some *achira* for me."

inye chká jatjwañana xwatsetsejaja bibiná

Again she responded like that: "I myself will become *achira*."

i nye ndoñese juwenan ntxam tbojtserwanka

And she just wouldn't listen, how could she beg her?

ii

chorna ch wamben mama jabokná inetsoñe jawashuntsam

Then that intended mother-in-law went out to plant corn.

inetsashuntsañokna santopeso ibninyenaka

Where she was planting corn she found a centipede.

i as cha chuwashuntsantxeka ibnetsutsjanganja

And then as she was planting corn, she struck it with her digging stick.

nye natjumbañe inetsashuntsañe

She just calmly continued planting corn.

yojabuchoká orna yojtá tsoy

When she finished she returned to the house.

chorna ibninyen ch bebinkwa jabokná impasajem

Then she found that intended daughter-in-law in bad shape.

intsatotebemañe betxaxena txa lisianajem

She was sitting there with her head all banged up,

umochkwanajem ibojinyem

she found her with her head covered.

iii

chorna ch wamben mama jabokná ibojatjay

Then that intended mother-in-law inquired:

ndayek sobrená chká biyatsmanaka

“Why, Niece, are you like this?”

chorna ibojojwá ndoñe kach batá chká xkondwabonaka

Then she answered: “Didn’t you, Aunt, do this to me?”

chorna ibojauyán ndayentxe chká tkunbjamaka

Then she said to her: “Where did this happen to you?”

orna ibnojwá ndoñe ch jajoka jenantxeka xkonjutsjanjanaka

Then she responded: “In the garden, didn’t you strike me with the digging stick?”

chorna ibnojwá jenantxeka ndayá santo pesontxe chká tijutsjanganja

Then she responded: “I struck a large centipede like that with my digging stick.

as ak ndoñe krischian nkondimunaka ibnauyanaka

Then you are not a human being,” she said to her.

iv

nye nyetxá sindutatxumbo

That's all there is just as I know it.

A young woman has come to the home of a marriageable young man. As in other stories of animal suitors, the intended partner experiences a period of trial marriage during which the intended spouse argues in favor but the family members find reasons to prohibit the union. Central to these myths is the moment of revelation, when the animal nature of the suitor is exposed. In "Tobixabe Parlo," it is the damage inflicted on the centipede woman's face when her future mother-in-law jabs at a centipede she encounters in the garden. Forewarning of this development came when the older woman inquires of the younger if she will help with the planting, and the younger woman responds that she herself will become the desired food item.

At the moment of revelation in all of these tales, the human interlocutor exclaims, "Cha ndoñe krischian!" ("He or she is not a human being!"), an exclamation of surprise that reverberates across the Kamsá mythic narrative corpus, so much so that it became a stock phrase in the marble games among the boys of my host family, who were listening to these tales, for someone who made a surprisingly accurate shot. There is a wistful tone in this set of tales, in recognition of the fact that sending away these animal suitors deprives human society of the transformative spiritual power they possess; these acts of rejection insure that the harsh conditions of mortal life will endure. The elders explain that these animal suitors came bearing knowledge that could have created an earthly paradise; but the cost is too high, the transgression of secure ontological boundaries ensuring a stable space for the continuation of civilization. Hence, the theme of paradise forestalled.

Evidence of what can happen if you choose the other path, that of accommodating animal suitors within the family of man and woman, abounds in the mythologies of adjacent groups as well as indigenous communities more distantly located. These mythologies suggest that the lure of spiritual power is greatly outweighed by the damage likely to ensue upon its acquisition. Among the Yekuana of Guiana, for example, "marriage to an animal spirit, even if dangerous, brings with it the chance to acquire power" (Bierhorst 1988:71). The Tucuna, a tropical forest group residing far downstream from the Sibundoy Valley,

feature in their mythology the culture hero Monmanéki, who selects a series of animal mates in his quest for a wife (Nimuendajú 1952). Each of these pairings brings serious trouble. One instance involves the macaw-woman who, like the Kamsá shulupsi bird, is able to fill large jars with maize beer using a small amount of corn. As in the Si-bundoy case, Monmanéki's mother finds the mass of corncobs unused and without inspecting the jars reproaches the younger woman, who takes offense and resumes her animal form. However, in the Tucuna myth she calls upon her husband to follow her, and the next episode tells of his attempt to do so. At this moment in the tale Monmanéki turns into a bird and his canoe becomes an aquatic monster, the lord of the fish on one stretch of the Solimões River.

Similarly instructive is the Tlingit bear story reported in Richard and Nora Dauenhauer's *Haa Shuká: Our Ancestors* (1988). In a tale narrated by Tom Peters, "The Woman Who Married the Bear," a woman is carried off by a seductive bear that in turn is killed by her brothers. But she takes to putting on the skin of her husband and eventually she and her children turn into bears themselves. Finally, she too is killed, by her younger brother. Juan Oso has a Tlingit counterpart, but the narrative framework is very different: his Tlingit cousins turn their destructive energies on their home communities and must be destroyed. Whether it be with a South American macaw or a Tlingit bear, the price of this cross-species mating and reproduction appears to be prohibitively high.

Conclusion

Kamsá mythic narrative is focused on the acquisition of spiritual power and on the need to channel it towards constructive ends. In this light, Kamsá myths offer a forum of moral philosophy, a deep meditation on the human condition; the life of hardship that we know emerges in this discourse as a precarious attainment always subject to a threat of annihilation, even as the human imagination leads us to perceive vastly superior possibilities. One phase of this mythology gives us stories about the beneficial actions of the ancestors, who were able to acquire and consolidate forms of knowledge making human civilization feasible. Another, as we see in the animal suitor stories, brings out the dangers of any renewed engagement with agents of unchecked spiritual power.

Drawing towards conclusion, let me attempt to place "Juan Oso" in a meaningful framework defined by the foregoing observations so that we may better adduce its true lineage. First, let's grant that "Juan Oso" is a token of a type with European roots and a remarkable distribution in the Americas, including among its indigenous peoples. This we can call the external profile of the tale, and in it we can detect an intersection of European and American storytelling. Second, as both the Assiniboine and Kamsá cases indicate, "Juan Oso" or "John the Bear" has an internal profile as well, where it participates as one narrative resource within a local set of story prototypes. These prototypes are characteristic of New World storytelling, and they emphasize, as just noted, the acquisition and channeling of spiritual power.

Native American mythologies are famously obsessed with the boundaries between the animal and the human, the fixing of these boundaries and their transgression, and the consequences of such transgression. If Kamsá mythic narrative can be read as moral philosophy on the prospect of securing stable society, then we can view the broad outpouring of indigenous myth in the Americas in similar terms as a meditation on the human condition. A key element in this complex is the quest for spiritual power, and this element often interacts with the theme of animal suitors. Native American mythologies are wrung-through with stories featuring animals seeking entry into the human family, and they offer different models for contemplation. In the Assiniboine corpus and several others, spanning South and North America, admitting these uncouth suitors to the human family brings access to remarkable powers but simultaneously generates a destructive force that cannot be controlled or confined. In the Kamsá corpus, these unions are typically avoided, with some remorse for the lost opportunities, but in the certainty that avoidance is the only safe and acceptable choice.

So, how does "John the Bear" fit into this bedrock of Native American mythology? In my analysis, it stands out as a European incrustation, attached to an indigenous armature as the outlier, the anomalous rather than the typical case. Juan Oso's lineage may be European, but he travels among numerous New World cousins who share his combined animal-human properties but evince radically different interests. Juan Oso and John the Bear tend to feature the acquisition of worldly wealth and power through military combat; tales starring his indigenous cousins are about the lure and danger of acquiring

spiritual power. As I see it, the constant element here, the amorous and seductive bear seeking a human mate, belies two very different story trajectories with regard to culture-of-origin as well as thematic logic. Juan Oso may have arrived from Europe, but his bear cohort in the Americas is deeply embedded in a New World narrative matrix.

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