Recovering European Ritual Bear Hunts: A Comparative Study of Basque and Sardinian Ursine Carnival Performances

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Everybody says, «After you take a bear's coat off, it looks just like a human».
Maria Johns (cited in Synder 1990: 164)

«Lehenagoko eüskaldünek gizona hartzetik jiten zela sinhesten zizien»
(«Basques used to believe that humans descended from bears»).
Petiri Prébende (cited in Peillen 1986: 173)[1]

«The word does not forget where it has been and can never wholly free itself from the dominion of the contexts of which it has been part».
M. M. Bakhtin (1973: 167)

Introduction

My interest in the *Mamutzones* dates back to 2002 when I was contacted by Graziano Fois, a researcher from Cagliari, Sardinia. Using the Internet, he discovered that I had done considerable research on Basque folklore and culture and wanted to consult with me concerning a theory he had developed concerning the origin of the name of the *Mamutzones*. He had been investigating this Sardinian cultural phenomenon for some time and was looking at the linguistic component of it. More specifically, he was attempting to identify the etymology of the root *mamu-*. As he pointed out, written documentation on the *Mamutzones* and *s'Urtzu* ('the bear') will not take us further back than the 19th century where they are first mentioned. However, there is abundant toponymic evidence for this root across Sardinia, and especially in the central part of it, a zone considered to be somewhat more conservative in terms of the retention of

[1] The quote is from an interview conducted in the fall of 1983 with one of the last Basque-speaking bear hunters in the Pyrenees, Dominique Prébende, and his father Petiri. It was the latter who among other things said the following: «Lehenagoko eüskaldünek gizona hartzetik jiten zela sinhesten zizien» ['In times past Basques believed that humans descended from bears'] (Peillen 1986: 173).

older cultural elements. Therefore, while written documentation on this phenomenon has a relatively shallow time depth, the toponymic evidence suggests a different picture: a far deeper time depth, although not one that can be dated with any precision. Stated differently, one avenue that might provide further insights into the origins of the *Mamutzones* and *s'Urtzu* would be to trace the etymology of the root *mamu-*.

Fig. 1. A typical *Mamuthone*. Source: http://www.tropiland.it/sardegna/Mamuthones.jpg.

Fig. 2. S'Urtzu. Source: Fois (2002).

Graziano laid out his theory to me in a short essay called «Liason entre Basque et Sarde pour un possible racine **mamu /*momu /*mumu*» (Fois 2002b). In it he compared a series of terms in Basque and Sardu which appeared to be cognate with each other, that is, their phonological shape and semantic meaning coincide closely. I found what he wrote quite intriguing, although until I read his article I had heard nothing about the Sardinian *Mamutzones* and their bear.

By the time that I read Graziano's essay, in 2002, I had already been investigating Basque traditional culture for more than a quarter of a century and was well aware of the etymology of the term *mamu* in Basque and its connection to a remarkable bear-like figure. In fact, the word *mamu* is only one of several phonological variants of the name of this ursine creature in Basque, while the names for the Carnival characters who appear to be structural equivalents of the *Mamutzones* (*Mamuthones* or *Mamuttones*) are referred to

by terms such *Mamozaurre*, *Momotxorro*, *Mumuzarro, Moxaurre,* etc., expressions which show similar phonological alternation in the root of the words (Frank 200a).[2]

I would also include the Basque *Joaldunak* or *Zanpantzarrak* in the same category as the aforementioned ritual performers.[3] The term *joaldunak* translates as 'those who possess bells', while *zanpantzarrak* is sometimes rendered as the «St. Pantzars», although that etymology is somewhat questionable. The performers in question are from carnivals celebrated in the villages of Ituren and Zubieta in Nafarroa. The performers wear two large sheep-bells on their backs.

Fig. 3. Momotxorros of Alsasua, Nafarroa. Source: Tiberio (1993: 58). Photo by Luis Otermin.

Fig. 4. Joaldunak bells. Source: http: //www.dantzan.com/albisteak/joaldunak-eta-abar.

[2] The first presentation I gave concerning this topic was in Cagliari, in 2005, in collaboration with Graziano Fois.

[3] With the advent of electronic media and the easy accessibility to digital photography and video, web pages have sprung up across Europe displaying local traditions and performance art, cultural artifacts that before were relatively inaccessible to researchers, except to regional specialists. As a result, in recent years the Basques, too, have paid more attention to what they see as the ritual counterparts of their own performers in other parts of Europe, including the Mamutzones. On January, 24, 2008, the newsletter produced by Dantzan.com, an organization composed of a large number of Basque dance groups, included a comparative study entitled «Joaldunak, Zarramacoak, Botargak eta Mamuthones-ak». It contains several striking video clips of performances from four locations in the Iberian Peninsula as well as from Sardinia and Bulgaria. The video clips not only afford the viewer an opportunity to see the performers in action, they also contain valuable ethnographic data: http: //www.dantzan.com/albisteak/joaldunak-eta-abar.

Fig. 5. Joaldunak of Ituren, Nafarroa. Source: http: //www.ituren.es/es/. Photo by Ernesto López Espelta.

I should clarify that there are slight differences between the costumes of the *Joaldunak* de Zubieta and those of Ituren. The main difference is that the former do not wear the sheepskin over their shirts to cover their upper body, while those from Ituren do. Also two smaller bells without clappers are attached to the sheepskin costume of the performers from Ituren. These smaller bells are fixed to the back of the performer, slightly above the two large sheep bells.

Although the bells are not clearly visible in some of the photographs (below), the noise they make can easily be appreciated in the following video footage taken during the Carnival of Ituren and recorded on February 24, 2008: http: //www.dailymotion.com/video/x4hcqm_carnavalituren_parties as well as in the video footage of the same festival found at http: //www.dantzan.com/albisteak/joaldunak-eta-abar. As is obvious, these public performances take place during the day-time hours, rather than at night. Today none of the *Joaldunak* performers wear masks and therefore their identity is easily recognized. This contrasts with practices from times past where they would hide their identity behind a mask made of kind of black fabric and they often changed the timber of their voices. That way their identity was further disguised. In fact, previously, the performers did not remove their costumes, not even their bells, during the entire festival period, eating and sleeping with them on.

Fig. 6. One of the *Joaldunak* of Ituren. Source: Tiberio (1993: 38). Photo by Luis Otermin.

When watching the footage, the characteristic jerky gait of the *Joaldunak* should be noted. As the folklorist and ethnomusicologist Juan Antonio Urbeltz (1996) pointed out, the performers place their feet on the ground in an odd, non-human way, that is, the way they walk imitates the rocking gait of a bear, i.e., a bear that is walking upright. By watching the videos available at http: // www.dantzan.com/albisteak/ joaldunak-eta-abar, the odd gait of the *Joaldunak* can be compared to the stylized way of walking that characterizes the *Mamutzones* and the *Botargak* from the small village of Almirete, some sixty kilometers northeast of Madrid, Spain. In Almirete, they celebrate this festival on February 2nd, a date known across Europe both as Candlemas and as Bear Day.[4]

Fig. 7. Joaldunak of Zubieta. Source: Tiberio (1993: 35). Photo by Luis Otermin.

Fig. 8. Procession of *Joaldunak*. Source: http: // www.pnte.cfnavarra.es/kzeta/ituren_erreport.htm.

I would note that the Basque Bear or *Hartza* who is accompanied by these performers, also has «horns», as can be appreciated in the following photos from the festival in Ituren. The costume is made out of sheepskin while the traditional headdress is constructed from the head of a ram and has the horns exposed (Tiberio 1993: 36).[5]

[4] For a detailed analysis of ritual performances associated with Candlemas Bear Day, particularly performances encountered in the Pyrenean region, e.g., Zuberoa, cf. Frank (2001).

[5] For more information on the *Joaldunak*, cf. http: //basque.unr.edu/dance/pages/yoaldunak.htm.

Fig. 9. Joaldunak in Ituren, Nafarroa. Source: http: //www.ituren.es/es/. Photo by Ernesto López Espelta.

Fig. 10. Hartza of Ituren, Nafarroa. Source: Visualiza.info/Zazu. Photo by Emilio Zazu.

Fig. 11. Hartza in Ituren, Nafarroa with its Keeper. Source: http:// www.pnte.cfnavarra.es/kzeta/ ituren_erreport.htm.

Fig. 12. Hartza of Ituren, Nafarroa. Source: http: //www.ituren.es/es/. Photo by Ernesto López Espelta.

Today these actors regularly perform in public and in broad daylight. Divided into two groups, they move along in single file, one after the other. They can also reverse direction, an act initiated by the two lead dancers. This can be seen clearly in the videos listed above. In other words, we are talking about a public performance constructed so that there are two roles: the active role of the performers and a passive role of the other participants, namely, the crowds of people who attend. On the other hand, even today the Hartza doesn't respect these conceptual boundaries, and constantly attacks the spectators, young and old alike.

Fig. 13. Hartza in Arizkun, Nafarroa, chasing bystanders. Source: Tiberio (1993: 71). Photo by Luis Otermin.

Fig. 14. Another «horned» *Hartza* from Ituren with its Keeper. Source: Tiberio (1993: 14). Photo by Luis Otermin.

In times past, however, the performances included what are called «good-luck visits» (Frank 2001, in press) where the actors in question, along with their bear, went about paying visits often to quite isolated farmsteads where they would ask for contributions, usually in the form of foodstuffs. Urbeltz describes the way that they would creep up on their victims:

> Para ello tapaban con yerba la boca del *yoare* ['bell'] al objeto de que no hiciera ruido. Caminando entre los campos conseguían entrar en la casa a través de la cuadra; una vez en la cocina, con sigilo, quitaban la yerba a los descomunales cencerros y comenzaban a caminar alrededor de la estancia con el consiguiente espanto de niños y mayores. ('In order to do this they stuffed the mouth of the *yoare* shut with grass with the objective of keeping it from making noise. Walking through the fields they would manage to enter the house through the stable [on the ground floor]; once inside the kitchen, with great care, they would remove

> the grass plug from the huge sheep-bells and would begin walking about the room which ended up scaring the children and adults'). (Urbeltz 1994: 230)

This description allows us to imagine times past when these masked performers marching along single file, in the dark of night, accompanied by their Hartza, would have given a very different impression than they do today, that is, as they slowly move along the public roads and streets of Ituren and Zubieta, in broad daylight, and with their faces totally uncovered.

In short, if we compare the performances from earlier times with those held today, we can see that the division between spectators – the audience – and the actors was far less rigid. Stated differently, the boundary between actor and spectator was totally dissolved through the direct physical interaction between both groups. The frightening, indeed, almost terrifying appearance of the intruders was emphasized by the strange black masks they wore and the way that they disguised their voices-speaking in a whisper in some locations, not speaking all or speaking in strange tongue that, supposedly, only they understood (Hornilla 1987: 24-27, 37-39). The intruders arrived at the farmstead, silently, often in the dead of night, appearing before the householders without warning. Thus, the sudden discovery of these wild, almost other-worldly creatures in their midst must have terrified the householders to no end, at least initially, and, consequently, the intimidating demeanor of the intruders must have left a deep and lasting impression on their hosts, that is, on those living in the house, children and adults alike.

Another characteristic of these Basque belled-performers is the way that they emit a rhythmic, low animal-like huffing sound, «huh, huh, huh, huh», produced by inhaling and exhaling rapidly, as they walk along. The sound itself is reminiscent of the characteristic huffing sounds that bears make in the wild, when disturbed, nervous or otherwise distressed (DeBruyn et al. 2004; Kilham 2008). It is often understood to be a sign of aggression; that the bear is about to launch an attack, whereas, in fact, it is associated primarily with what is called a «bluff charge», which is nevertheless extremely intimidating for any human, even if the person recognizes that the bear's action is intended more as a warning:

> When a person gets too close to a mother with young cubs, the sow will usually display, letting the person know her intent without having to attack. If the person disregards her signals, she may kick it up a notch by cocking her ears, charging and vocalizing a face-to-face 'huh, huh, huh, huh'. Often the sow will also use a greatly modified false charge or swat to the ground in an attempt to persuade an intruder to back away. These gestures constitute a motivational use of ritualistic displays. The intentional display is used to convey a message or prevent an attack. Bears have great success in using these displays to intentionally motivate people to drop food or

> knapsacks. […] The false charge is done in combination with other bluff displays, like chomping, huffing and snorting. Depending upon the situation, this usually reflects the bear's desire to delay or avoid direct confrontation. (Kilham 2008)[6]

Should a bear decide to attack, it is silent, although such attacks against humans are rare. While today very few spectators would be familiar enough with bear behavior to recognize the significance of this ritual «huffing» of the performers of Ituren and Zubieta, in times past when encounters with wild bears were much more frequent, the «huffing» sound would have been especially meaningful and would have added another indication of the ursine nature of the masked performers.

Linguistic evidence for the Bear Ancestor: Hamalau

In Euskal Herria (Basque Country) there is another aspect of the *Hartza* bear character that needs to be addressed, namely, the fact that this creature forms an integral part of a complex cosmogony of significant antiquity, one that holds that humans descended from bears, in short an ursine story of origins that places bears at the center of the creation process. As will be demonstrated in this study, in the case of Euskal Herria, the socio-cultural embedding of this creature is so extensive that it affords us a mechanism for understanding or at least for exploring the potential meaning of the performances in which this character plays a major role. In addition, when examined with care the socio-cultural situatedness of the Basque data opens up avenues for re-evaluating the meaning of the *Mamutzones* and *s'Urtzu*, their performances as well as the semantic content of other Sardinian linguistic artifacts sharing the same or a similar root, e.g., *momotti*.

Fig. 15. Mamuthones during the Feast of St. Anthony Abbot (January 17). Source: http: //imagocaralis.altervista.org/index.php?mod=04_Soci/Fabrizio/Mamoiada&inscomm=1.

[6] Cf. also Kilman & Gray (2002).

Although this topic will be treated in considerable depth in the course of this study, at the point I would mention that in Basque there is strange bear-like being who goes by the name of *Hamalau* «Fourteen», a compound composed of *hama(r)* 'ten' and *lau* 'four'. As will be explained shortly, *Hamalau* plays a central role in Basque traditional belief and performance art (Perurena 1993: 265-280). For example, variants of this term are commonly used to refer to a frightening creature that parents call upon when their children misbehave, i.e., the counterpart of the «babau» or «spauracchio» in Italian. The dialectal variants of the word *hamalau* include *mamalo, mamarrao, mamarro, mamarrua, marrau* and *mamu*, among others (Azkue 1969; Michelena 1987). All of these variants show «nasal spread», that is, the word ends up having two /m/ sounds.

In order to understand what has taken place with the phonological shape of the expression *hamalau*, we need to keep in mind that in many Basque dialects the letter */h/* is silent. Therefore, in these dialects *hamalau* would have been pronounced as *amalau* (as it is today in Batua, the Basque unified written standard). This means that because of the phenomenon of nasal spread, the word ended up with two */m/* sounds, the */m/* which starts the second syllable spread to the beginning of the word: *amalau* > *mamalau*. Also, I would remind the reader that since Basque has no gender, a variant form such as *mamalo* should not be interpreted through the grammatical lens of a speaker of a Romance language. In other words, while the *-o* ending on these variants might appear (to a Romance speaker) to be indicative of masculine gender, in Basque this is certainly not the case.

Then I would mention that in the case of the variant *mamarrao,* another common phonological change has taken place: the replacement of one liquid, i.e., */l/*, with another, namely, with a trilled */r/*, so that the last syllable */lau/* is pronounced as */rrao/*. Finally, the variant *marrau* demonstrates further phonological erosion, i.e., the loss of the second syllable */ma/*: *mamarrao* > *ma(ma)rrao* > *marrao* > *marrau*. In the instance of *mamu*, additional phonological loss can be detected: *(h)amalau* > *mamalau* > *mamarrao* > *mam(arr)au* > *mamu*.[7] All of these linguistic processes will be treated in more depth in the subsequent chapters of this study and compared to the Sardinian examples.

[7] In Basque, some of the phonological variants associated with the semantic field of *hamalau* also refer to small beings, tiny magical semi-human creatures, often helpful to humans but of a rather indefinite shape; they also appear incarnate in the form of insects, as if the former as well as the latter were viewed as capable of shape-shifting, undergoing metamorphosis, taking on a disguise, e.g., as a larva might be understood to shape-shift when it becomes a chrysalis and then turns into a butterfly. For example, *mamutu* carries meanings related to «putting on a masque» or

In the case of Sardinia, in addition to the *Mamutzones* and a variety of toponyms having similar roots, there are numerous other words that are of interest. These have essentially the same meanings but slightly different phonological representations. Here I refer to the fact that the stem of the word varies in its phonological shape, demonstrating roots in *mamu-, momo-*, *momma-* and *marra-*. In the case of the root form *mamu-*, there are *mamuntomo*: «spauracchio»; *mamuntone*: «fantoccio»; *mamuttinu*: «strepito»; *mamuttone*: «spauracchio, spaventapasseri»; *mamuttones*: «maschere carnevalesche con campanacci»; *mamutzone*: «spauracchio» as well as *mamus* «esseri fantastici che abitanoi nelle caverne». In the instance of the variant of *momo-* we find: *momotti*: «babau, spauracchio»; *mommai*: «befana»; *mommoi*: «babau, befana, fantasma, licantropo, orco, pidocchio, spauracchio, spettro»; *momotti*: «babau, spauracchio»; *marragotti*: «befana, biliorsa, bilioso, fantasma, mangiabambini, mannaro, orco, ragno, spauracchio, spettro» (Fois 2002b; Rubattu 2006).[8]

Also, I would mention that the names used for the Basque ritual counterparts of the Mamutzones reveal similar phonological correspondences. Thus, in the case of the Basque and Sardinian materials, we have two types of data that can be compared. One type consists of the linguistic artifacts themselves, that is, lexical material found in each language, while the other type of data is embodied

otherwise «disguising oneself»; to «becoming enchanted, astonished, astounded» or «put under a spell»; more literally it means «to become a *mamu*» while the verb *mamortu*, from the root *mamor-*, means both «to become enchanted» and «to form oneself into a chrysalis» or «to become an insect» (Michelena 1987, XII, 56-59). Hence, in the same word field, we find two types of magical creatures. On the one hand there are the large, strange beings that are sometimes invoked by adults to frighten children and get them to behave, and, on the other hand, another set of creatures, much smaller, usually helpful although at times mischievous. The latter are said to wear a red tunic or pointed hat and otherwise dress in black. Anyone familiar with the qualities of elves, pixies, fairies, brownies, and leprechauns which abound in Celtic folklore would see a resemblance. As mentioned, they also sometimes take on the shape of insects. They go by the name of *mamures* or *mamarros* in some Spanish-speaking zones; in contrast their Catalan counterparts, are called *maneirós* and appear as black beetles. As Fois (2002) has observed, these semantic extensions are reminiscent of certain terms in Sardu, a topic that will be taken up in the next chapter of this investigation.

[8] The English counterparts of these terms are as follows: from the root *mamu-*, *mamuntomo*: 'scarecrow'; *mamuntone*: 'puppet'; *mamuttinu*: 'racket', 'clamour', 'noise'; *mamuttone*: 'scarecrow'; *mamuttones*: 'masked performers wearing bells'; 'masks'; *mamutzone*: 'scarecrow'; *mamutzones* 'masked performers wearing bells' as well as *mamus* 'fantastic beings who inhabit caverns'; from the variants *momo-* and *mammo-, momotti*: 'hag', 'witch', 'scarecrow'; *mommai*: 'hag', 'witch'; *mommoi*: 'bogey man', 'hag', 'witch', 'phantom', 'spectre', 'were-wolf', 'ogre', 'louse', 'scarecrow'; *momotti*: 'bogey-man', 'scarecrow'; and from *marra-*, *marragotti*: 'hag', 'witch', 'imaginary beast', 'phantom', 'baby-eater', 'were-wolf', 'ogre', 'spider', 'scarecrow', 'spectre'.

socio-culturally in traditional belief and performance art, again as manifested in Euskal Herria and Sardinia, respectively. The former data set is linked to the latter in the sense that the meanings of linguistic artifacts are «cultural conceptualizations», socio-culturally situated and shared by a community of speakers. Thus the cultural conceptualizations should be understood to be «distributed» not only across the community of speakers at any given moment in time, but also across time and space, in the sense that they pass from one generation to the next. In other words, the aforementioned lexemes and their connotations provide us a means of reconstructing the ways in which they were used by speakers in times past as well as their prior cultural embodiment in social practices.

Given that we are talking about linguistic artifacts, beliefs and performance art that have been transmitted orally, they have not been subjected to rigorous documentation or interpretation until quite recently. In short, the traces they have left in the written record are scant. Therefore, a different approach must be employed in order to develop a methodology that does not rely solely on written texts, but is capable, nonetheless, of reconstructing and interpreting the cognitive and material artifacts under analysis. In short, we are dealing with cultural conceptualizations that need an interpretative framework. So the first step is to see whether the comparative approach, originally proposed by Graziano Fois, can provide us with new insights into the Sardinian materials (Fois 2002a, b, [2002]). Naturally, at this stage in the research, our conclusions should be understood as tentative.

With respect to the question of methodology, in the case of etymological reconstructions which deal with cultural conceptualizations and that are in turn socio-culturally entrenched, we are faced with the task of tracing the evolutionary path taken by these artifacts over time, but without the aid of written sources. Stated differently, if examined with care linguistic artifacts can reveal the imprints of the collective thought processes of a given speech community, thought processes that shape and eventually give rise to the meanings associated with the linguistic artifacts at any given point in time. In other words, since language itself is a distributed form of cultural storage, every time a word is used it is used in a specific context, and often in relation to a particular type of event. This way the original meaning(s) associated with the word can be reinforced, or changed ever so slightly.

Over time, a word can acquire new meanings, nuances that were not there in the beginning, while retaining its older meanings. Hence, by examining the semantic record it is sometimes possible to reconstruct these prior thought processes and the socio-cultural embedding of the linguistic artifact. When

the linguistic artifact also has a performance component, e.g., when it is also the name of a class of ritual performers, the performers and their actions become a kind of material anchor for the artifact: the meaning of the artifact is off-loaded so to speak onto the performer, his costume and actions. Thus, the meaning of the linguistic artifact can be transmitted across time by means of these ritual performances.

In the same fashion, past technologies and even belief systems can leave their mark in the linguistic record, i.e., in the form of linguistic artifacts. For instance, today many people still use the word «icebox» to refer to a «refrigerator», a clear reference to an earlier stage in which food was kept inside a «box» that contained large blocks of «ice». Even though the referent of the term «icebox» is no longer literally an «ice-box», i.e., a box for ice, the word has survived, attached to an analogically and functionally similar object. And because it has survived, even if we have never actually seen the prototype of an «icebox», we can imagine what it must have been like because of the information provided to us by the word itself.

In a similar manner, once the etymology of the dialectal variants of the word *hamalau* is identified, i.e., *mamalo, mamarrao, mamarro, mamarrua, marrau* and *mamu*, among others (Azkue 1969; Michelena 1987), we are better able to explore the meanings associated with the term *hamalau*, the socio-culturally embedded significance of the bear-like character called *Hamalau* and the performance art that is associated with him. In other words, the socio-cultural situatedness of the terms, including the variants of the terms and the way their meanings have been off-loaded, provides us a means of reconstituting the earlier meanings and socio-cultural significance of the expressions. Furthermore, if we find correspondences between the Basque terms and those found in Sardu, this comparative data will add another dimension to the discovery process and another source of information for interpreting the word field in a more comprehensive fashion.

At this juncture the following comments by Ammerman and Cavalli-Sforza (1984: 139) are relevant: «Confidence in [evolutionary] reconstructions is built by the development of multiple lines of evidence that generate independent support for a particular interpretation. Ultimately, it is the growth of new evidence in individual fields and the creation of expectations for findings in other fields that generate a dense network for evaluating a reconstructive hypothesis». Therefore, before entering into a detailed discussion of the linguistic artifacts themselves, the first step is to outline the various lines of evidence that will be brought to bear on the problem, particularly those that will be treated in this chapter of the study.

The Bear Ancestor: Hamalau

When I first decided to do fieldwork in Euskal Herria it was evident to me that I would need to learn Euskera (Basque). Soon after I had gained enough proficiency in the language to carry on a basic conversation, a strange thing began to happen to me. People would take me aside and tell me the following in a low voice, as if they were sharing a very important yet almost secretive piece of knowledge: «We Basques used to believe we descended from bears». The first time someone told me this, I had no idea what I should say in response. I found the statement totally amazing. Yet over and over again the same thing happened to me. People, who didn't know each other, who had no contact with each other, ended up telling me the same thing.

Finally, I came to the conclusion that I had come across a key piece of data. I just didn't know what to make of it. Subsequently, I tried to find references to this Basque belief in bear ancestors. But all my attempts were futile. There was nothing in the literature; nothing written down anywhere. The belief seemed to have survived only orally, though oral transmission, passing from one generation to the next, without any outsider ever noticing it and writing it down. Later I would discover that the ursine genealogy was connected to a rich legacy of belief and cultural conceptualizations.

It would not be until the late 1980s that I would come across a book with a concrete reference to this belief. In fact, the first written documentation of what my informants had been telling me was published in 1987, in a brief article by the French-Basque ethnographer Txomin Peillen (1986),

Fig. 16. The seven provinces of Euskal Herria, the historical Basque Country, span France (light yellow) and Spain (rest of the map) Names in this map are in Basque. Source: http: //en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ Basque_Country_(historical_territory).

entitled *Le culte de l'ours chez les anciens basques*. In it he reports on an interview he conducted in Zuberoa (Soule) with one of the last Basque-speaking bear hunters in the Pyrenees, Dominique Prébende, who was 48 years old at the time. Dominique's 83 year old father, Petiri Prébende, was also present. Peillen begins by explaining the circumstances of the interview:

> Au cours d'une enquête sur la chasse traditionnelle, il y a deux ans, nous décidâmes d'interroger un des derniers chasseurs ayant participé à des battues d'ours brun des Pyrénées à Sainte-Engrâce, dans le Pays de Soule [Zuberoa] en Pays Basque. ('Two years ago, while carrying out a survey of traditional hunting practices, we decided to interview one of the last hunters who had taken part in the brown bear hunts of the Pyrenees at Sainte-Engrâce [Santa Garazi], in the province of Soule [Zuberoa] in Euskal Herria [Basque Country]'). (Peillen 1986: 171)[9]

He then records the following comments of Dominique:

> Dominique Prébende nous déclara que son groupe de chasse, avait pratiqué fréquemment la battue à l'ours; il ne put ou ne voulut pas nous dire combien d'animaux furent ainsi abattus. Il protesta qu'il n'en avait pas tués personnellement, tout en ajoutant qu'il craignait moins l'ours que le sanglier. Poussé à s'expliquer sur cette chasse, il nous déclara que tuer l'ours porte-malheur «ür gaixtoa ekharten dizü» et que l'homme qui le fait ne donne rien de bon «eztizü deuse hunik emaiten», dit cet homme de 48 ans. ('Dominique Prébende told us that his group of hunters had frequently taken part in bear hunts; he couldn't or didn't want to tell us how many animals [bears] were killed this way. He objected that he had never personally killed any, quickly adding that he feared a bear less than a wild boar. Pressed to explain more, the 48 year-old man confided in us, declaring that to kill a bear brought bad luck «ür gaixtoa ekharten dizü» [lit. «it brings you bad luck»] and that the man who did would receive nothing good from it «eztizü deuse hunik emaiten» [lit., «it doesn't give you anything good at all»]'). (Peillen 1986: 171)

Peillen speaks of a special prayer that was recited by the hunters to protect themselves from the dangerous influence of bears:

> Toutefois il semble que les anciens savaient se protéger du maléfice précédent. Notre père […] nous racontait que les chasseurs d'autrefois disaient une prière avant de se rendre à la Chasse à l'Ours. Dominique Prébende, également, le vit faire à des hommes aujourd'hui décédés, et nous avons peu d'espoir de recueillir cette prière 'Hartz otoitzia' [The Bear prayer]. ('However, it appears that the old hunters [hunters from before] used to know how to protect themselves from this curse. Our father […]

[9] The term *battue* is used generically to refer to hunting, but it also refers to a particular hunting practice, e.g., for wild boar, which involves a group of hunters moving silently through the woods, often separated into two lines, moving along in single file. And then suddenly one group would begin to make all sorts of racket to flush out the game, driving it in the opposite direction, toward the other row of hunters. In times past, this was done using various kinds of noisemakers including bells (Caro Baroja 1973: 192-197).

> told us that in times past hunters would say a prayer before setting off on a Bear Hunt. Similarly, Dominique Prébende witnessed men, now deceased, perform this supplication, though we have little hope of recovering the prayer today, i.e., the 'Hartz otoitzia' [The Bear Prayer])'. (Peillen 1986: 171)

While killing a bear, or admitting that one had killed a bear, brought bad luck, the bear's paw was highly esteemed for it was said to bring good luck.[10] Indeed, it acted to protect the person from the «evil eye» and other illnesses. Speaking of this practice of preserving the bear's paws, Peillen adds this comment:

> Cette coutume de les garder est commune aux chasseurs d'ours sibériens et amérindiens, pour qui la patte est un porte-bonheur; de même manière inexplicite elle est gardée par les chasseurs basques. Ce rôle de la «patte à griffes» dans la magie basque s'observait au début du siècle, lorsque pour préserver les enfants du mauvais œil on suspendait à leurs cous des pattes de blaireaux. ('The costume of preserving them [bear paws] is common to Siberian and Native American bear hunters, for whom the paw is a good-luck amulet; in the same inexplicit manner, it is preserved by Basque hunters. The role of «paws with claws» in Basque magic was observed at the beginning of the century [20th century], a time when protecting young children from the evil eye, involved hanging badger paws around their necks'). (Peillen 1986: 172)

With respect to the prophylactic qualities attributed to badger paws, I would note that the etymology of the various terms used today in Basque for the badger goes back to *hartz* «bear». The terms are nothing more than phonologically reduced or otherwise altered forms of *(h)artz-ko*, the diminutive form of *(h)artz* 'bear'. Pronounced as *(h)arzko*, the compound term refers to a 'small bear, little bear'. Given the characteristics of badgers, their fearlessness and willingness to defend their turf at any cost, this lexical choice would seem to be taxonomically appropriate. For example, Llande (1926: 94) gives the following variants for Zuberoa (Soule) and Lapurdi (Labourd) and Nafarroa Beherea (Basse-Navarre): *arsko* (S, N), *azku* (S), *azkuñ* (S), *hazkon* (N), *azkonarro* ((L) and *azkoin* (L, N) (cf. also Frank in prep. -a). Azkue (1969, I: 84) lists the Zuberoan word for «badger» as *hartzku,* which translates transparently as «little bear».[11]

[10] For a discussion of the widespread nature of this custom, cf. Mathieu (1984).

[11] The protective powers of the «little bear» (badger) are discussed by Barandiaran: «En Ataun (Guipuzcoa), había costumbre de colocar pieles de tejón sobre los cuellos de los bueyes, que uncidos al yugo iban a ser expuestos al público, como al conducir el carro de boda y en otras ocasiones semejantes, pues existía la creencia de que así quedaban a cubierto de toda mala influencia de los aojadores» ('In Ataun (Gipuzcoa) there was the custom of placing badger furs over the neck of oxen that were yoked to be exhibited in public, for example, to the wedding cart or in other similar occasions, since there existed the belief that in this way they would be protected from all bad influences of those who might cast the 'evil eye" (Barandiaran 1973–1983, V: 292). For additional information on this and related topics involving the prophylactic properties of the «little bear» (badger), cf. Frank (in prep.-a).

Later on in the interview, another aspect of the belief system comes into view: the human-like appearance and behavior of bears.

> Dominique Prébende nous déclara qu'il ne put manger de l'ours, qu'il y goûta et vomit au souvenir de l'animal qu'il avait dépouillé et qui lui semblait avoir une étrange morphologie humanoïde. Il nous apporta la patte qui se trouvait dans sa chambre, pour confirmer ses dires en ajoutant «dena jentia düzü», c'est tout à fait un être humain, et le père qui se trouvait assis à proximité commenta avec humour «latzxago», un peu plus rugueux. ('Dominique Prébende told us that he couldn't eat bear meat, that when he tastes it, he vomits at the thought [memory] of the animal that he had skinned and that it seemed to him to have a strange human-like shape. He brought us the paw that was kept in his room, in order to confirm what he had said, adding that «dena jentia düzü», it's just like a human being, and his father who was seated nearby, commented with humor, «latzxago», [but] a little more rough'). (Peillen 1986: 171)

I would add in passing that in Basque the expression *latzxago* is the comparative form of the adjectival root *latz*. The meaning of this word is not limited simply to 'rugueux' or 'rough', but rather describes something that is 'terrible', 'frightful', 'fear-inspiring' as well as 'powerful' and 'extraordinary'. Hence, Dominque's father is correcting his son, adding that the bear is not simply «like a human», but rather more terrible, powerful and extraordinary than human beings.

At this juncture, Peillen reveals the key factor that was motivating his informants to speak as they had about the bear, insinuating that it had human-like characteristics. And again, as we will see, the informant is reluctant to speak in public about this particular belief. In fact, it is only after the tape-recorder is turned off that he confides in his visitors, assuming that this way the secret knowledge he is going to share would be kept safe from the prying ears of outsiders. We need to remember that Petiri was speaking in Basque to other native speakers of Basque. Hence, it would seem that he waited to tell them the most important part until he felt confident that the knowledge would not be disseminated indiscriminately among those who were not Euskaldunak (Basque-speakers), i.e., he waited until they turned their tape-recorder off. Referring the belief in a bear ancestor, Peillen states:

> Cette croyance décrite pour les Amérindiens et les Sibériens, n'est pas décrite pour l'Europe à notre connaissance, bien que tous les éléments précédents la fasse pressentir. C'est ainsi qu'alors que nous avions éteint le magnétophone, terminé notre enquête, Petiri Prébende nous déclara tout de go: «Lehenagoko eüskaldünek gizona hartzetik jiten zela sinhesten zizien» (les anciens basques croyaient que l'homme descendait de l'ours). Prié de répéter ses propos il ajouta que l'homme est fabriqué à partir de l'ours. Il nous donnait la clef des croyances précédentes. ('To our knowledge, this belief described for Native American and Siberian peoples hasn't been described for Europe, even though all the preceding elements make one suspect its presence. There is also the fact that when we had shut off the tape-recorder, ending our interview,

> Petiri Prébende suddenly told us: «Lehenagoko eüskaldünek gizona hartzetik jiten zela sinhesten zizien» («Basques used to believe that humans descended from bears»). When we asked him to repeat his remark, he added that humans were created by the bear. He had given us the key to the previous set of beliefs'). (Peillen 1986: 173)[12]

The last statement by Petiri concerning the fact that humankind «est fabriqué à partir de l'ours» is probably a literal French translation of the Basque sentence «Gizona hartzak egina da».[13] The expression could also be rendered as: «The bear created humankind». Or, expressed more somewhat more elaborately, «Our human origins go back to the bear who created us». When examined more closely, this cosmogenic belief in bear ancestors resonates strongly with a hunter-gatherer mentality, that is, with what would be a Mesolithic mindset, and not with the agricultural world view characteristic of Neolithic pastoralists and farmers. Moreover, we see that the persistence of this ursine cosmology is found not only in the folk memory of Basque speakers who are no longer emotionally committed to the tenets of the belief system, but also in the minds of individuals like Petiri and his son Dominique whose comments suggest that at least a residual true belief in the Bear Ancestors still survived up to the end of the 20th century. In the sections that follow we shall discuss other evidence – other types of cultural survivals – relating directly or indirectly to this ursine cosmology.

A Central Component of the Cosmology: Bear Ancestors and the Celestial Bear

At first glance a cosmology that holds that humans descend from bears strikes one as odd, especially to those of us accustomed to having anthropomorphic high gods, i.e., to scenarios in which the divine being or beings are portrayed in human form. Nonetheless, rather than being particularly unusual, it is a common genealogy for belief in a bear ancestor has informed the symbolic order of hunter-gatherer peoples across the globe wherever ursine populations have been present.[14] In Europe, where primates were absent, humans shared their habitat

[12] The phrase «l'homme est fabriqué à partir de l'ours» offers challenges to any translator since a completely literal translation of it is rather difficult. It might be glossed into English in a number of ways: 'man was formed/shaped from/by bears'; 'from the bear came mankind'; 'the bear created/forged humankind' or more loosely 'humans descend from bears' or even 'the lineage of humans sprang from the bear'.

[13] Obviously, Petiri uses the term *gizona* which literally means 'the man', but in this context it means 'humans' or 'humankind'.

[14] Among human populations who shared habitat areas not with bears, rather with primates, the latter were often seen as their ancestors (Mathieu 1984; Shepard and Sanders 1992).

areas with bears and apparently saw themselves reflected in this intelligent creature, whose skinned carcass, i.e., divested of its fur coat, the bear's body is remarkably similar to that of the body of a human being (Shepard 1995; Shepard and Sanders 1992). In fact, Finno-Ugrians affirm that, once its fur coat is removed, a female bear has the breasts, hips, legs and feet of a young woman (Praneuf 1989: 9), while in some locations elaborate ritual ceremonies accompanied the act of «undressing» the bear, most particularly the «unbuttoning» of its coat (Krejnovitch 1971: 65).[15]

In addition, the animal's incredible memory of landscape and keen sense of smell and hearing gave it a distinct advantage over humans when it set out to hunt the same animals and plant foods as its human descendents. Indeed the bear's hearing is so acute that at 300 meters it can detect human conversation, and it responds to the click of a camera shutter or a gun being cocked at 50 meters. Also, we must remember that humans and bears are foragers, omnivorous creatures who have been stuck in the same ecological niche for hundreds of thousands of years, competing for the same food sources, salmon runs, berry patches and honey trees (Shepard and Sanders 1992).

Undoubtedly humans were impressed not only by the bear's uncanny ability to overhear human conversations, but also by its small, almost human-like ears, facial expressiveness, ability to walk upright on the soles of his feet, as humans do, as a well as by the animal's great manual dexterity.[16] Also, in contrast to other temperate mammals, the female nurses her young holding them to her breasts, which are located on her chest rather than her stomach, just as a human mother does.

In short, bears and native peoples lived together on the continent of Europe for thousands of years. Both walked the same trails, fished the same salmon streams, dug roots from the same fields, and year after year, harvested the same berries, seeds, and nuts. The natives came face to face with bears when both coveted the same berry patch, for instance, or when a hunter, bringing help to pack home an elk he had killed, discovered that a bear had buried the carcass and was lying on the mound. Sometimes the hunter fled, sometimes the bear. The relationship was one of mutual respect (Rockwell 1991: 1-2).

[15] Krejnovitch's meticulous fieldwork which he carried out in 1926, 1927, 1928, and 1931, shows the advantages that accrue when linguistic materials are utilized as tools of interpretative analysis.

[16] Because of his mode of walking, the bear's footprints are remarkably similar to those left by human beings. For this reason, in the Pyrenees, the bear is often referred to as *pedescaous* (*pieds nus*), i.e., «he who walks barefoot» (Calés 1990: 7; Dendaletche 1982: 92-93).

However, among the indigenous peoples of Europe there is evidence that the relationship was far more complex. Bears were often central to the most basic rites of these groups: the initiation of youths into adulthood, the sacred practice of shamanism, the healing of the sick and injured, and the rites surrounding the hunt (Praneuf 1989; Rockwell 1991; Shepard and Sanders 1992; Sokolova 2000; Vukanovitch 1959). The striking parallels that traditional peoples have identified between humans and bears, traditions and practices found in many geographical regions of the world, have been studied at length, particularly by those who are concerned with the belief systems of hunter-gatherer societies. (Praneuf 1989; Rockwell 1991; Shepard and Sanders 1992). Yet little serious attention has been paid to the possibility that in Europe there are still survivals of this ursine genealogy, survivals that that might well date back to an earlier hunter-gatherer symbolic and cultural order; survivals that today take the form of traditions, oral tales and ritualized performance art. In the case of Western Europe some of the most profoundly ingrained spiritual traditions and folkloric survivals of this ursine belief system have been identified among the Basques as well as in the Pyrenean-Cantabrian zone where ritualized bear hunts are still celebrated today.

Indeed, as we have seen, Petiri Prébonde's words reiterate what must have been a wide-spread belief in the not too distant past – at least among rural Basque-speakers: «Lehenagoko eüskaldünek gizona hartzetik jiten zela sinhesten zizien» ('The Basques used to believe that humans descended from bears'). Moreover, other evidence suggests that this highly entrenched belief system might have been widespread in other parts of Europe, for example, in Sardinia. Given that, until quite recently, this traditional lore has been transmitted from generation to generation almost exclusively through oral practices and performance art, Basque culture provides us with a remarkable window onto what appears to be a much older and more complex European symbolic order that was grounded in this ursine genealogy.

In this respect, we need to recall that the significance of the elderly Basque man's comments about humans descending from bears is reinforced by those of his son who stated that, although a seasoned bear hunter, he had never been able to eat bear flesh. The mere smell of it made him want to vomit because «dena jentia düzü» ('it's just like a human being'). Cognitive parallels from North American Indians provide further insight into these statements. In the Yukon, the Tlingit said: «Grizzlies are half human». The Ojibwa often referred to bears as *anijinabe*, their word for Indians. Likewise, the Yavapai of Arizona said, «Bears are like people except that they can't make fire». Many plains and

southwestern tribes, including the Yavapai, would not eat bear meat because they believed it was like eating a person's relative (Rockwell 1991: 3-4). We find a similar sentiment expressed by the Native American story-teller Maria Johns who is cited in Snyder (1990: 164): «Everybody says, 'After you take a bear's coat off, it looks just like a human'». Bears were humans, but they wore heavy fur coats.

In fact, outside Europe we also find that many hunting tribes thought of bears as the shamans of the animal world and believed the animals' hairy skin, paws and long claws possessed therapeutic virtues. According to Yavapai myth, at the dawn of time the first great shaman was Bear. Coexisting with these mythic narratives was a universal belief among northern hunters that bears possessed powers analogous to those possessed by shamans. Many said that bears changed their form to become humans, other animals, or even inanimate objects. And in turn, those shaman healers who had the bear as a spirit helper wrapped themselves in the skins of bears, wore necklaces of bear claws, painted bear signs on their faces and bodies, and smoked pipes carved in the shapes of bears. In their medicine bundles they kept bear claws and teeth and other parts of the animal. They used bear claws and gall and bear grease in their healing ceremonies. They ate the plants bears ate and used them as their medicines. They danced as they thought bears danced and they sang power songs to the animal (Rockwell 1991: 63-64).

At the beginning of the 20th century, as we have noted, in the Basque region of the Pyrenees, bear paws were still highly esteemed as well as badger paws and claws, the latter animals being classified taxonomically in the Basque language as a «little bears». Perhaps because of the difficulties imposed by the bear paw's large size and weight, in order to protect children from the «evil eye», the small paws of badgers, remarkably similar in shape to bear paws, were hung from children's necks as amulets (Peillen 1986: 171-172). Moreover, since contact with the bear itself was especially effective in terms of obtaining the benefits of its curative powers, until about fifty years ago, in the Pyrenees it was still common for the bear and his trainer to make annual visits to the villages where they were warmly welcomed. Parents brought their children so that they could be placed on the back of the bear who, under the care of the bear trainer, would take exactly nine steps. In this manner parents were able to protect their children from physical illnesses and, in addition, insure that they would be well behaved (Dendaletche 1982: 91).

The belief that attributed similar curative powers to the bear also guaranteed the positive reception of bear trainers all across the Balkans (Vukanovitch 1959). In fact, there is evidence that these bear doctors even made regular house calls

to cure the sick and protect the households from harm. In this sense, the visitation brought good luck to the household. However, there is reason to believe that similar rituals were performed – with real bears – across much of Europe and indeed there is documentary evidence that, earlier, even monasteries were directly involved in training young bears who would go about with their trainers to conduct these healing ceremonies. In short, these activities formed part of what are called «good-luck visits».

The possible diffusion of these healing practices across Europe can be judged, at least to some extent, by the fact that schools were set up to train young bears to carry out their duties. For instance, in Ustou and Ercé in Ariège (Midi-Pyrenées) we discover two of the most well known of those institutions of higher learning where little bears were sent to be educated and trained, often at public expense. The schools continued to function into the 20th century, more concretely up until World War I. Indeed, earlier the teachers and future bear trainers constituted a highly structured fraternity based in the Pyrenean zone of Ariège, while their pupils ended up performing throughout Europe (Bégouën 1966: 138-139; Praneuf 1989: 67). Upon graduation the ursine pupils were brought to the town square for a remarkable public ceremony (Praneuf 1989: 68-69).

From the descriptions of the feats that the young bears had to learn in order to graduate from these bear academies, we can see that the pupils were taught specific tricks, among them that of falling down dead on command and then jumping up once more, again on command. This feigning of death and subsequent resurrection of the bear was an essential component of the «good-luck visits» (Praneuf 1989: 69), a topic we will take up shortly.

While the aforementioned examples of bear academies are based on data drawn from the Pyrenean region, in the northeast of France, in the Bas-Rhine at Andlau, there is documentation concerning training bears at a Christian site that was inaugurated in the ninth century, the Abbey of Andlau. Although nominally Christian, the legends connected to the location strongly suggest a deeply rooted belief in the sacredness of bears. The site in question is linked to a miracle about a bear. Supposedly, as a result of the miraculous event, those inhabiting the abbey began to house bears inside their quarters. The villagers of the area brought a loaf of bread each week to offset the costs of feeding the ursine lodgers. Up until the French Revolution, bear-trainers from this zone of Alsace also had the privilege of free lodging and a stipend of three florins and a loaf of bread.

Even today, next to the crypt of the tomb of the officially recognized saint of the Abbey, Saint Odile, one can see the figure of a bear, carved in stone, resting on one of the pillars (Clébert 1968: 325-328). Yet one suspects that in

earlier times the Christian saint's silent companion may have played a more active role in the rites celebrated at that sacred site. In fact, one suspects that the location in question may have served as a breeding ground for tame bears and bear trainers, as a place were the members of the guild met and exchanged information (Gastou 1987). Perhaps further research would reveal the existence of other religious sites, inhabited by bears and their keepers, scattered across Europe (such as the sanctuary of St. Remedio in northern Italy). It should be remembered that in Medieval Europe the bear-keepers often performed in the company of a troupe of masked actors, musicians and jesters, going from village to village to conduct their «good-luck visits».

Fig. 17. Bear leader and musicians. Source: engraving from Olaüs Magnus, *Historia de gentibus septentrialibus*. Rome 1555. Reproduced in Michel and Clébert (1968: 329).

Another interview: Evidence for a belief in the celestial bear

In the case of Europe, because of its physical appearance and great intelligence, the bear was, in fact, the animal that most closely replicated a human being. However, in contrast to its human relatives, the bear seemed to be capable of dying and being resurrected from a death-like sleep in the spring of each year. Evidence from many native peoples demonstrates that this ability has been perceived by humans as one of supernatural, even mystic, proportions.

Among the Basques, belief in the sacredness of the bears as well as their role as ancestors of humans persisted into the latter part of the 20th century, as we have seen in the case of the 1983 interview with Dominique and Petiri Prébende. Similar documentation, perhaps of an even more remarkable nature, is encountered in another unusual interview conducted slightly over a hundred years earlier, in 1891. This time the informants are not Basque bear-hunters but rather two Basque bear-trainers. In the interview the informants speak of the special powers of bears and the sacred relationship holding between their ward, an earthly bear, and a Celestial Bear who is conceptualized as a

sort of ursine divinity. This remarkable document consists of a brief report by an English folklorist by the name of Thomas Hollingsworth who was vacationing in the French Basque region. There in the town of Biarritz he happened to run into two bear-trainers, a man and his wife, accompanied by their bear. His published report documents the interview that he conducted with them. (Hollingsworth 1891).[17]

The text sheds additional light on the conceptual schema underlying the belief in an ursine genealogy found among Basque people as well as on certain celestial aspects of the belief system itself. The informants were Navarrese Basques whose first language was Euskera (Basque). The Englishman communicated with the pair in Spanish since they knew no French. That the first language of the two informants was Esukera is a conclusion easily drawn from the introductory remarks of Hollingsworth who begins by addressing the readers of the English journal *Folk-Lore*:

> Can any reader of *Folk-Lore* throw any light on a superstition prevalent apparently among the Basques of Navarre and the Aragonese of the Pyrenees, to the effect that the bear acts as a sort of watch-dog to St. Peter at the gate of Heaven. My informants are two Navarese [sic] Basques, a man and woman whom I saw exhibiting a bear in Biarritz. I have no doubt that, if I could have spoken Basque, I could have extracted much more information than I did, but it was difficult for them to speak Spanish, the only language except their own with which they were at all acquainted. (Hollingworth 1891: 132)[18]

Hollingworth states that initially the couple was shy and reticent and that it required a good deal of persuasion on his part to win their confidence even in the slightest degree. The interview, as reported by Hollingsworth, provides information concerning the role of the Celestial Bear as the guardian of the Gate of Heaven. Through the comments of the two Basque informants, we see that bears were viewed as extraordinarily intelligent animals, so intelligent in fact that they once ruled the earth. Also, according to the two bear keepers, bears are capable of understanding human speech, even Euskera.

[17] I am greatly indebted to Evan Hadingham for bringing this interview to my attention over twenty years ago.

[18] The fact that the two had no knowledge of French suggests that they lived not on the French side of the border, but rather on the Spanish side or at least that at some time in the past they had had more contact with Spanish speakers. Otherwise, if they had resided on the French side of the border, it is more likely that they would have known some French and probably no Spanish. Another inference that might be drawn from the linguistic skills of the two Basque speakers is that they exhibited their bear primarily in locations where Basque was the language spoken, and consequently would have had little need for using either Spanish or French in their daily communication.

In the interview Christianized celestial lore, mixed with elements from deeper strata of the conceptual schema relating to the veneration of a Celestial Bear, can be detected. The couple utilizes what Lienhard (1991) has defined as *hybrid* discourse where two different cultural codes or schema are manipulated simultaneously. One element drawn from the earlier schema is the emphasis placed by the bear trainers on the presence of wolves in Hell. In fact, wolves are portrayed as adversaries of bears in the folk belief of the Iberian Peninsula (Díaz 1994).[19]

In Hollingworth's report the two bear guardians demonstrate profound respect for their ward, although they never overtly mention any belief on their part in a bear ancestor. Given the significance of Hollingworth's text, I shall cite the entire section in which he talks about the interview:

> They told me that their bear, when they were not travelling about, lived with them in their hut in the mountains, and that they were always careful to treat him kindly and feed him well. For example, if they had not enough of fish (which they looked upon as a luxury) for themselves and the bear, the latter must be fed and satisfied first. They declared that the animal understands all that is said about him, and observes and comprehends any household work, trade or occupation which may be going on; «and that is the reason that a bear who has lived with men should never be allowed to return to the forest and mountains, for he will tell the other bears of what he has seen and learnt, and they, being very cunning, will come down into the valleys, and by means of their great strength, added to the knowledge they have thus gained, will be able to rule men *as they did before*!» (Hollingsworth 1891: 133) [emphasis in original]

Hollingsworth was unfamiliar with the meaning of the reference to this earlier time when bears supposedly ruled the earth. The reference to such a past epoch could refer to the mindset that humans must have had long before the invention of firearms, at a point in time when humans were far out-numbered by bears, yet shared mountain trails and salmon streams with them. Far from feeling superior to these furry and very intelligent creatures, humans must have been keenly aware of the possibility of an unexpected encounter and therefore probably paid close attention to the habits, territorial ranges and feeding patterns of their ursine cohorts. Moreover, according to field work conducted by Dendaletche (1982: 95), in the Pyrenean region of Barèges, popular belief holds that formerly the country was governed by five bears, each of which was in charge of a different district of the zone. Humans and other creatures were obliged to render homage to their ursine rulers, their

[19] I am greatly indebted to Joaquín Díaz, Director of the Ethnographic Museum «Joaquín Díaz» of Urueña, Valladolid, Spain, for this insight.

ancestral kin. Undoubtedly the Basque bear-trainers' remarks, cited by Hollingsworth, hearken back to a similar preterit cognitive framework.

Consequently, the reverent attitude of these two bear keepers underlines the fact that the bear was deeply respected among the Basques. He was treated with similar reverence across both America and Eurasia in times past, as is evidenced in the case of rites for the dead bear celebrated until recently in Lapland, Alaska, British Columbia and Quebec. «All across North America, Indians have honored bears. When northern hunting tribes killed one, they spoke to its spirit, asking for its forgiveness. They treated the carcass reverently; among these tribes the ritual for a slain bear was more elaborate than that for any other food animal» (Rockwell 1991: 2). As Shepard has observed, there is evidence of a wide and ancient distribution of bear ritual. It is present in virtually every country of Western and Eastern Europe, in Asia south to Iran, and among many of the Indian nations of the United States, even into Central and South America (Shepard and Saunders 1992: 80).

With regard to the animal's uncanny abilities, the Asiatic Eskimos, for example, held that during the festival of the slain bear, the bear's shadow-soul could hear and understand the speech of humans and men, no matter where they were (Shepard and Sanders 1992: 86), while the Tlingit said, «People must always speak carefully of bear people since bears [no matter how far away] have the power to hear human speech. Even though a person murmurs a few careless words, the bear will take revenge» (Rockwell 1991: 64). Analogous beliefs are found among the Ket (Yenesei Ostyaks), an Ugric-speaking people of Siberia, with a rich tradition of bear worship, who believe that the bear is chief among animals, that beneath its skin is a being in human shape, divine in wisdom. For them the bear was invested

> with the capability of understanding the speech of all beasts as well as of man. Besides, they fancied that though the bear in summer was dull of hearing because of the rustling of leaves, in autumn or winter, however, it was a very dangerous to speak ill of the bear or to boast of successful bear hunting. 'Should you speak badly of him one day or the other, and go hunting and find a good place, a bear will rise from behind a tree suddenly and grab you with his paw'. (Alekseenko 1968: 177)

Thus, the Basque bear keepers' words echo a similar belief in the bear's ability to understand human speech. And, far from describing him as a cuddly pet, the Basques' comments, represent the bear as a familiar yet awesome being, in a fashion comparable to that of northern peoples for whom he is «un animal intelligent, habile, humain, familier et redouté» (Mathieu 1984: 12).

Among Finno-Ugric peoples and Native American groups, the bear is viewed as omnipotent and omnipresent. He has the power to hear all that is said. For

this reason hunters would avoid mentioning the bear's real name, choosing rather to address him with euphemisms. That these might have been the qualities attributed to the European Celestial Bear and his earthly representatives, appears to be demonstrated in social practice by the semantic taboo existing among Slavic and Germanic peoples. This led them to avoid mentioning the bear's real name, an avoidance pattern which, in all likelihood, stemmed from a profound adherence to the tenets of this animistic cosmology. The substitute term utilized in Slavic languages was «honey-eater», while Germanic tribes preferred to call him the «brown one», an expression that gave rise eventually to the English word «bear», linked etymologically to the words «brown» and «bruin» (Glosecki 1988; Praneuf 1989: 28-32; Stitt 1995).[20]

Hollingsworth concludes his report with these pertinent revelations:

> I endeavored to learn when this sad state of affairs existed [when bears ruled humans], but could only ascertain that it was *antes* – before, in other times. «El Orso», [sic] said his keepers, «es el perro de Dios, el perro de San Pedro ['the bear is the dog of God', 'the dog of Saint Peter']; he is very wise and thoughtful; he sits beside the blessed saint at the gate of Heaven, and if those who seek to enter have been cruel and unkind to bears in this world, the saint will turn them away, and they will have to go and live in hell, with the devils and the wolves». «¡Qué hay más por decir!», concluded the woman, «el orso es el perro de Dios ['the bear is the dog of God']». The bear's name was *Belis*. I spell it as it was pronounced. Throughout the conversation the peasants would constantly interrupt themselves to speak to the animal,[21] assuring me that he perfectly understood all that was said. (Hollingsworth 1891: 133) [emphasis in original][22]

These last remarks by the couple merit a closer analysis. As I have noted, we are dealing with a hybrid discourse where the tenets of Bear Ceremonialism are interwoven with those of Christianity. There is also a topological overlapping between the two systems: there is spatial configuration with a higher, afterworld,

[20] Specifically the PIE etymon is **bher-*, 'bright', 'brown', gave rise to the Old English form *bera*, and eventually to the Modern English word *bear*. The word «bruin» is a cognate of this group, often used in English to refer not to the color «brown» but to bears themselves (AHD 1969: 1509).

[21] Since the two Basques spoke Basque to their bear, at this juncture, what they were saying to the bear, that is, what they were telling it in Basque, was more likely a translation or at least a summary their ongoing conversation with Hollingworth. Or if we assume that they believed the bear was already following the conversation in Spanish – that is, the conversation between them and Hollingworth – they might have been directing additional comments to the bear, in Basque, and therefore including him in the conversation. From the text itself, this point is somewhat unclear.

[22] From Hollingsworth's attempt at a phonetic spelling of the bear's name as *Belis*, it appears more likely that the bear's name was *Beltz*. To an English ear this might sound like *belis*, whereas in Euskera the word *beltz* means «black» and is a common nick-name for black animals.

situated above, where the soul of humans goes and where the person's actions here on Earth will be submitted to a final judgment, before the soul is allowed to enter heaven. In this case, the blending of the two belief systems ends up positioning the bear as «the dog of St. Peter» or as «the dog of God», sitting next to the Saint at the gate of heaven. In other words, the «bear» takes on the characteristics of a «guardian». However, when examined with more care, we see that the questions that St. Peter addresses to the new arrival deal with the way the person has treated bears. Thus, we might say that St. Peter is acting on behalf of the bear figure, sitting silently beside him, «very wise and thoughtful». Stated differently, St. Peter is in charge of interrogating the new arrivals concerning whether they have treated earthly bears with proper respect. In this way the soul's entrance into to Heaven is conditioned by the way the person has interacted with bears on Earth. Even though the bear is called «el perro de San Pedro» or «el perro de Dios», expressions that give deference to St. Peter or God as if these Christian actors were the superior figures, in reality, because of the way the scene is structured, ultimately, it is the silent figure of the bear that ends up determining whether the soul will be admitted to the Other World.

This type of hybrid discourse is a rather typical result of what happens when two belief systems become fused; where the older system survives as a substrate element within the new system. In these circumstances, it is not unusual for the older spiritual figure to survive, but often only after being assigned a more peripheral role. The figure now shows up seated, silently, beside the new spiritual authority, or otherwise demoted to a lower level of importance, visible, nonetheless, to those who chose to reflect more upon the implications of the co-location of the participating elements. This situation is an example of a phenomenon called *contested ritual agency*.

In recent years increased attention has been paid to this concept of contested ritual agency, particularly in cultural studies where two belief systems have been in prolonged contact with each other (Eade and Sallnow 2000). More specifically, the term refers to manner in which symbols of identity are often skillfully manipulated by a given cultural group. It is commonly employed to refer to the manner in which two opposing groups of ritual specialists interact, one group protecting the older belief system while the members of another group act as proponents of the new system. Over time this confrontation sets up a *contest* with respect to the manner in which meaning is assigned to the symbolic artifacts in question. Thus, the interpretation of the symbolic artifacts – which is at the center of this process of meaning-making – depends on the way that the different groups adjust to each other over time. In some instances, the older interpretation

of the artifacts is retained, albeit in a modified form, although the old interpretation can also disappear from view entirely.

Conflicts arising from contradictory allegiances to a given symbol are most apparent in the case of sacred sites, hermitages and other locations that are venerated by the local populace and whose origins date back to pre-Christian times. For instance, in the case of the Abbey of Odile, in times past more than one figure appears to have been venerated, one being the officially recognized Christian saint, and the other a pre-Christian ursine being, incarnate in the silent stone figure of a bear. In this way, the continued presence of the bear – whose figure was placed near the crypt of the official saint of the Abbey – would be an example of a compromise, a solution that resulted from a situation of contested ritual agency.

Other related examples have been collected by Clébert who also discovered a curious custom associated with the church of Orcival: «Les portes de l'église étaient recouvertes de peaux d'ours tués dans la region» (Clébert 1968: 326). Clébert alludes to another custom that is of interest to us: the association of certain sacred sites with saints named Saint Ours (Saint Bear). He also mentions hagiographic traditions dating back to fifth century Europe that concern bishops and other shadowy figures also called Saint Ours and who sometimes are said to have founded monasteries:

> Il n'y a en France que trois *Saint-Ours* officiels (des communes, je ne relève pas les hameaux): un près de Meyronnes dans les Basses-Alpes, un près de Ponte-gibaud dans le Puy-de-Dâme, un près d'Albens en Savoie. On remarquera tout de même que tous trois se trouvent en territoire sauvage. Mais il y a aussi plusieurs *Saint-Urcisse* (ou *Urcize*) (Tarn, Lot-et-Garonne, Cantal) dont le patron est Ursicinus, ermite bizarre établi sur les bords du Doubs et vénéré en Suisse à *Saint-Ursanne*, où, dans la grotte de l'ermitage, il est représenté couché, un ours à ses pieds. Comme sainte Ursule, vénérée à Bâle... On ne trouve, dans l'hagiographie officielle, pas moins de six saints Ours, dont trois furent français: un évêque de Troyes, qui «florissait» au Ve siècle, un évêque d'Auxerre du temps de Clovis, et un abbé de Touraine qui au Ve siècle fonda le monastère de Loches. (Clébert 1968: 326)

The above citation might be glossed as follows:

> In France there are only three official Saint Ours ['Saint Bear'] (I am not listing the non-official ones found in hamlets): one near Meyronnes in the Basses-Alpes, one near Ponte-gibaud in le Puy-de-Dâme, and one near Albens in Savoy. At the same time one notes that all three of them are found within wilderness areas. Moreover, there are also many Saint Urcisse (or Urcize) (in Tarn, Lot-et-Garonne, Cantal) whose patron saint is Ursicinus, a bizarre hermit who established himself on the banks of the Doubs River and who is venerated in Switzerland at Saint Ursanne, where, in the grotto of the hermitage, he is represented lying down with a bear at his feet. Like Saint Ursule, who is worshipped at Bâle... In the official hagiography there are at least six Saint Ours, of which three were French,

> a bishop from Troyes who 'flourished' in the fifth century, a bishop from Auxerres from the time of Clovis, and an abbot from Touraine who in the fifth century founded the monastery of Loches.

Whether any of these monasteries also housed bears as was done at the Abbey of Andlau is not known.

In sum, the presence of hermitages dedicated to bear-like saints provides an additional avenue for identifying a substratum of popular belief in a more primitive bear-deity in this part of Europe. Taken alone and, therefore, in isolation from other evidence, these sites could be interpreted in many different ways. However, when other converging lines of evidence are brought into view, the logical conclusion seems to be that residual belief in the older bear-deity has survived in the material and linguistic artifacts associated with these sites. Furthermore, the geographical distribution of these sites could be brought into play as a way of mapping the locations of sacred sites, albeit tentatively, where the veneration of bears was once practiced.

In this respect, I would like to bring up two other examples of solutions that have resulted from complex processes of contested ritual agency in which the indigenous role of the bear has been altered as a result of contacts with a new religious narrative. Both examples come from outside Europe and are described by Labbé (1903: 231) in his work on Bear Ceremonialism among Altaic peoples. First, there is the case of the Mongols: «De pauvres Mongols, qui pratiquent la religion bouddique, m'ont dit que l'Homme-Dieu, incarnation vivante de Bouddha, vit dans un monastère du Thibet, et élève un ours, dont il écoute les conseils» ('Concerning the poor Mongols, who practice the Buddhist religion, they have told me that the Man-God, the living incarnation of Bouddha, lives in a monastery in Tibet, and raises a bear who gives him advice').[23] This scenario is quite similar to the one we have just documented where the bear is portrayed as «el perro de Dios», as if it were a subservient figure. Yet at the same time, it is the treatment of the bear that determines whether the soul enters heaven. That is, whereas the bear sits beside St. Peter, and is therefore inserted into a Christian narrative, because of the way it is portrayed, the bear still retains the authority assigned to it in the earlier symbolic order.

The second example cited by Labbé shows a more disturbed or disrupted situation with respect to the value attributed to the earlier ursine belief system. Rather than still retaining his ritual autonomy, the bear has been demoted. That process of demotion might also reflect the socio-political and economic

[23] Here the phrase «pauvres Mongols» refers to the sad state of the Mongols, their misfortune.

inequalities experienced or at least sensed by the indigenous population in question vis-à-vis the outsiders, the proponents of the new symbolic regime. Labbé speaks of the Orotchones, a small tribe occupying a zone of eastern Siberia along the Upper Amour river Amour, and how they recontextualized the indigenous norms of their Bear Ceremonialism: «Certains Orotchones considèrent l'ours comme un dieu déchu, qui fut vaincu par un dieu plus fort» ('Some Orotchones consider the bear a fallen god, who was conquered by a stronger god') (1903: 231).[24]

All of the above examples of merged imagery appear to contain a level of contradiction and ambiguity which probably masks past tensions between opposing groups of ritual specialists and conflicting allegiances to very different cosmological systems, one that was animistic and yet another that tended to portray the divinity in human form. While there are many factors that lead to the retention or rejection of indigenous norms, the survival of the older meanings seems to be related to the level of significance assigned to the symbolic artifacts themselves in terms of their role as markers of identity for the group in question. Generally speaking, the more a group's identity is invested in a given artifact, the more likely it is that the artifact in question and the symbolism attached to it will be respected, even viewed as something sacred. And, consequently, the more resistant it becomes to change. Thus, the better chance there is that the symbol's older meaning(s) will survive, albeit in slightly modified but still recognizable form.

Moreover, those who remain most attached to the older cultural network – whose lives and/or livelihoods are most closely linked to it – are most likely to be those whose belief system more clearly reflects the tenets of the older system. This appears to be the case with: 1) Dominique and Petiri Prébende interviewed in 1983; 2) the two Basque Basques with their trained bear interviewed in 1891; and 3) perhaps more importantly, at least in the context of this study, the way that the older system has been kept in the performance art associated with the Basque *Mamoxaurres*, *Momutxorros*, *Marraus*, etc. and the Sardinian *Mamutzones*. In both instances, the resilience of the performances has been controlled by the conceptualization of their centrality to processes of identity formation and the felt need to reaffirm that identity, although in a few locations there is an incipient tendency to orient performances not to the community itself, but rather to outsiders, as a way to attract tourists (and their money) to the town.

[24] Cf. Bayley 1994 for other historically attested examples of contested ritual agency.

The Bear Son and Hamalau «Fourteen»

Extensive fieldwork conducted over the past thirty years in the Basque region of the Pyrenees led to the discovery of the existence of an archetypal hero, half-bear, half-human, called *Hartzkume* in Basque whose name means 'Little Bear' and a set of stories that narrates his exploits. The name *Hartzkume* derives from *hartz* 'bear' and (*k)ume* 'infant', 'baby', 'little one', literally translated, «bear-baby». In the eastern dialects of Basque, the main character is also known as *Hartzko* (*Harzko*), 'Little Bear', a diminutive form of *hartz* 'bear' which we mentioned earlier in reference to the magic powers of «badger paws».

But what concerns us here is other name by which this character is known, specifically, *Hamalau* which, quite curiously, translates as 'Fourteen'. When I began doing fieldwork in the Euskal Herria, some thirty years ago, my focus was on exploring various aspects of traditional Basque culture, including Basque metrological practices. That line of ethnomathematical research led me to realize that certain Basque numbers had connotations that struck me as, frankly, rather bizarre, especially the expression *hamalau* which means 'fourteen', a compound composed of *hama(r)* 'ten' and *lau* 'four'. Later I would discover that the term *hamalau* was used in a variety of settings, not merely as the name of a character in a folktale. In short, I stumbled across Hamalau and the ursine cosmogony quite accidently.

Because of the way that the Basque linguistic data, collected through field work and interviews with Basque-speaking informants, ended up providing important information concerning the meanings associated with term *Hamalau*, I will lay out the discovery process that led ultimately to the revelation of the belief in bear ancestors and the ursine cosmogony itself. At the same time, I have chosen to provide this more detailed narrative of the discovery process, rather than a mere summary of its results, in order to illustrate the means by which similar linguistic information embedded in Sardu might also be recuperated, by paying close attention to the socio-cultural embedding of the words themselves.

When first I began to analyze the semantic field surrounding the word *hamalau,* I was confronted with a very diverse set of meanings. First, I would emphasize that my fieldwork was done in the province of Gipuzkoa. There I discovered, initially, that for many native-speakers of Basque the number fourteen refers to the notion of «infinity». For example, one informant indicated that *hamalau* was the greatest number that could be imagined, even though the individual in question worked as an industrial engineer for a large corporation,

that is, he was someone who dealt with large numbers and Western mathematics on a daily basis. In fact, the association of the word *hamalau* with the notion of «infinity», or at least the use of «fourteen» to refer to an infinite amount of something, appears to have been relatively commonplace among speakers of the Gipuzkoan dialect of Basque (Perurena 993: 265-280).

It was soon obvious to me that whatever the connotations were for the word «fourteen», they weren't restricted to its meaning as a number. It was something that a person, a least a male person, could compare himself to, and in this case, in a positive sense. Moreover, there was an additional problem with this aspect of my research: I soon discovered that the term *hamalau* was being used with unfamiliar and unexpected referents. Indeed, the first time I heard the following exchange between two elderly males, both native-speakers of Basque, I was taken aback:

> *Zer moduz?* ('How are you?').
> *Ondo, hamalau bezain ondo!* ('Good. Just as good as *fourteen*')

After that incident, I kept my ears pealed and soon afterwards I came across another example: «*Zein uste du, hamalau alkandoraz*?» ('Who does he think he is, *fourteen* with a shirt on?'). This exchange allowed me to perceive another aspect of the term: whatever it referred to, the being in question didn't normally wear human clothes. (Urbeltz 1994: 315-316).

In 1991, Antxon Ezeiza, a Basque filmmaker, offered other examples. Although Antxon was not himself a Basque-speaker, his mother was. Nonetheless, she spoke to her son in Spanish. He recalled that she would use the word *hamalau* to reprimand him when he was misbehaving. Antxon recalled the context in which this occurred as follows: «Sí, ahora me acuerdo. De niño mi madre solía regañarme diciendo: Qué te crees? Hamalau?» ('Yes, now I remember. When I was a child my mother used to scold me saying: Who do you think you are? *Hamalau*?'»). Another common expression that she used was: «Todos los vizcaínos se creen *hamalau*» ('All the people from Bizkaia think they are *hamalau*') (Ezeiza 1991). In order to understand the implications of her words we need to recall the following: Antxon's mother was from the province of Gipuzkoa, a province with a predominantly rural Basque-speaking population. Traditionally Biscayans (especially people from the metropolitan area of Bilbao) have been stereotyped by Gipuzkoans as people who exaggerate and think they are superior to the rest of the Basques. Thus, her words refer to a kind of friendly rivalry that exists between Gipuzkoans and their neighbors to the west, the inhabitants of Bizkaia.

Because of the contexualization of the word in these examples, I could see that the term was had to refer to someone who held a position of authority and therefore inspired respect. Therefore, when someone was putting on airs, pretending he was more important than he really was, the term was used ironically: «Who does he think he is, fourteen?». In other words, the individual in question was acting inappropriately, that is, in an arrogant fashion. Stated differently, the person was attributing to himself powers that were not his, acting as if he were in a position to exercise authority over others, that he was more important than the others when he was not. Further research demonstrated that all of these sayings represent linguistic residue, fossilized semantic traces linked to the earlier ursine cosmology that centered on the Bear Ancestor as well as to socio-culturally situated practices.

Returning now to the topic of the sequence of events that led to discovery process itself, once I was finally convinced that in addition to referring to a number, the word *hamalau* had to refer to a human-like creature, or at least human enough to be used as a term of comparison for human beings, I began asking Gipuzkoan speakers if they could describe Hamalau to me. This approach turned up another significant piece of evidence. One of my informants offered the following description: «Hamalau is kind of a clown, a trickster of sorts, who eats and drinks a lot and has a good time. He is also bigger and stronger than most men».[25] Eventually, the explanation for this last characterization of Hamalau would come clearly into view.

When interviewing one of my Basque informants, she said this characterization of Hamalau as a larger than regular humans, as a kind of glutton, eating and drinking to his fill, had a simple explanation: that Hamalau was the main character in a Basque folk tale, although not one that everyone remembered anymore. She told me that in the tale Hamalau is portrayed as half-bear and half-human and, as such, he is much bigger and stronger than other children; and when he grows up he is a voluminous eater (as are all bears especially in the late summer) and because of his mixed-parentage he is endowed with superhuman strength. Naturally, this is because in the stories, Hamalau's father is a Great Bear while his mother is a human being.

Finally, I should cite the conclusion reached by Patziku Perurena, another researcher who has done extensive work on the word fields and connotations of Basque numbers, especially «fourteen». In a radio interview, dating from 2000, he stated that perhaps the best interpretation of the figure of Hamalau would be

[25] Cf. Perurena (1993: 265-280) for many additional examples.

to compare him to the Christian notion of God. In short, Perurena suggested that Hamalau might be understood best in following way: that for Basques this creature was their pre-Christian deity (*Hamalaua, gure Jaingo* 'Fourteen, our god'). His conclusion was based, in part, on the remarkable attributes that the number «fourteen» has in terms of its «infinite nature» and «omnipotence» as well as the related socio-cultural embedding of Hamalau in Basque folk belief (Perurena 1993: 265; 2000).

Although outside the scope of this preliminary discussion of the connotations of the term *hamalau*, I would mention in passing that there is also other evidence for the socio-cultural situatedness of the term, namely, that the term *hamalau* formed in part of the title of an actual judicial official, the *Hamalau-zaingo,* whose duties included watching over the community in question. In short, this individual was charged with keeping track of those members of the community who misbehaved in some way, violating the community's norms. In the case of Zuberoa, the individual who held this office even had immunity from prosecution as indicated in the law codes from the same zone: «Rubrique II, Art. VI: 'Nul homme auquel tombe la charge de *fermance vesialère* qui au langage du pays est appelé *sainhoa* ou *zaingoa*, ne puet être jugé en la cour de Lixarre ni en autre cour de Soule'» ('No man to whom the office of *fermance vesialère* falls, [an office] that in the language of the country is called *sainhoa* or *zaingoa*, can be judged in the court of Lixarre or in any other court of Soule [Zuberoa]') (Haristoy, 1883-1884: 384-385).

Speaking of the office of *zaingoa* Haristoy adds that:

> Les *besiau vesain* (vecini) désignaient les habitants d'une localité, vivant sous le même régime et constituant la *communauté*. Le *fermance* (en basque *bermea* caution) *veizalère* ou *vezalière* était la *cautión communnaie*: charge héréditaire que faisait de celui que en était investi le *responsable* des autres *voisins*, le surveillant, l'huissier de la communauté (Haristoy, 1883-1884: 383 ftnote).

Haristoy's discussion can be glossed as follows: «The *besiau vesain* ('neighbors') referred to the inhabitants of a given locality, living under the same regime [legal code or form of government] and constituting the *communauté* ['community']. The *fermance* (in Basque *bermea* ['security, bail, bond, collatoral']) *veizalère* or *vezalière* was the *cautión communnaie* [a charge relating to the exercise of oversight or supervision with respect to the other members of the community], a hereditary office that made the individual who was invested with it the one who was responsible for [monitoring the behavior of] the other neighbors, [the person acted as] a guardian or inspector, as the bailiff of the

community [watching out for infractions of communal norms and law]». Other evidence suggests that this office was not originally hereditary, but rather was renewed annually and rotated through the households making up the community or *auzoa*. Furthermore, there is reason to believe that among the duties that fell to the *Hamalau-zaingoa* was that of acting as a kind of judge, determining the seriousness of the infraction or crime and perhaps also imposing the appropriate punishment and seeing that it was carried out.

Bear Ceremonialism and the Bear Son narrative

Although I initially believed that the Bear Son narrative was restricted to the Pyrenean region, subsequent research revealed a very different reality. The figure of the Bear Son, born of a Great Bear and human female, far from being exclusive to the Pyrenean zone, is identified with a cycle of stories and related ritual performances found throughout Europe (Cosquin 1887: 1-27).[26] The latter performances include what are called «good-luck visits». Variants of these visits and related ritual practices have survived surprisingly intact into the 21st century. Indeed, they form part of rich legacy of popular performance art whose cognitive roots and cultural conceptualizations reach back to a much earlier worldview that draws its meaning from what now appears to be an archaic pan-European belief that humans descended from bears: that bears are our ancestors (Frank 2005b). As we shall see, the «good luck visits» themselves have acted as a vehicle for the cultural storage and preservation as well as the oral transmission of the tenets of the earlier European belief system, through reiterative mechanisms typical of oral cultures.

The Bear Son tales represent the most common motif found in European folklore (Cosquin 1887; Espinosa 1946–1947: 499-511; 1951; Fabre 1968; Frank 1996, 2007). While folklorists did not recognize the significance of the European stories in terms of their possible linkage to this much older ursine cosmogony, the widespread distribution of the Bear Son tales eventually did catch their eye. And while the tales have not been an object of serious investigation by ethnographers and anthropologists, by the end of the 19th century folklorists were taking a second-look at them. However, at that time they focused their

[26] As stated, the pan-European hero is known as *Hartzkume*, *Hartzko* and *Hamalau* in Euskera, while he goes by the name of *Juan el Osito* in Spanish, *Jean l'Ours* in French, *Giovanni l'Orso* in Italian, *Hans Bär* in German and *Ivanuska* in Slavic languages.

efforts mainly on the task of classifying the motifs and variants that showed up in them (Cosquin 1887).

By 1910 Panzer had documented 221 European variants of the –301-story type, the descent of the Bear Son hero to the Under World (Panzer 1910). In a study published in 1959, 57 Hungarian versions of the tale are mentioned (Kiss 1959) and in 1992, Stitt, in his study *Beowulf and the Bear's Son: Epic Saga, and Fairytale in Northern Germanic Tradition*, recorded 120 variants of the Bear Son story for Scandinavia alone (Stitt 1995). The cycle of oral tales is present in all the Indo-European language groups of Europe as well as in Basque and in Finno-Ugric languages, e.g., in Finnish and Saami and also in Magyar (Hungarian) and it is even among the Mansi (Voguls). Moreover, the most complete and least disturbed versions of the tales – ones containing the most archaic structural elements – come from former Basque-speaking zones of France and the Spain or from the Basque-speaking region itself. In short, generally speaking, a cline from west to east can be detected in the tales with the most archaic variants being found in western Europe, especially in the Pyrenean zone and its immediate environs. Nonetheless, throughout Europe still today we encounter abundant examples of the cultural practices and performance art that implicate the previous veneration of bears and the bear ancestor.

The widespread distribution of the motif is best understood once we recognize that we are dealing with relatively archaic materials emanating from this much earlier European cosmology, this earlier European story of human origins. In fact, for Europe there is reason to suspect that the Bear Ancestor, progenitor of humans, was linked symbolically to the Great Bear (Ursa Major) constellation (Frank 1996; in press; Frank and Arregi Bengoa 2001; Shepard 1995, 1999; Shepard and Sanders 1992).

Paul Shepard has referred to this earlier worldview as a kind of «trophic metaphysics» where the complex network of food-chain relations is understood and articulated in narrative and social practice. Furthermore he has suggested that initially the image of Ursa Major, the «sidereal bear», was projected on the upper world as «the mythic celestial equivalent» of these relations in the earthly world (Shepard 1995: 6, 1999: 92-97). Gary Snyder, on the other hand, speaks of the process of «re-inhabitation» where the separation and alienation between human and animal is removed; the dichotomy between «man and nature» is erased and the boundaries between culture and nature become ambiguous (Snyder 1990: 155-174, 1995). In short, the assumption that we descend from bears ruptures more familiar modern day hierarchical and anthropocentric modes of thought, e.g., that «man is superior to beasts» (Frank 2003, 2005b; Hartsuaga 1987).

Residual Bear Ceremonialism in Europe

Evidence for the residual practice of Bear Ceremonialism in Europe is demonstrated in many forms, including ritual reenactments of the bear hunt and folkloric performances portraying scenes from the Bear Son saga itself (Alford 1930, 1937). Perhaps the most elaborate reenactments of the bear hunt are found today in the Pyrenean-Cantabrian zone and, I should emphasize, also in Sardinia. In the Pyrenean region, the performances held each year in Arles-le-Tech are probably the most structurally complex, leaving aside the complexity of the Basque Maskaradak of Zuberoa.[27] However, there are a number of other locations in the Pyrenean-Cantabrian zone where ritual bear hunts and/or performances involving a bear actor take place each year.

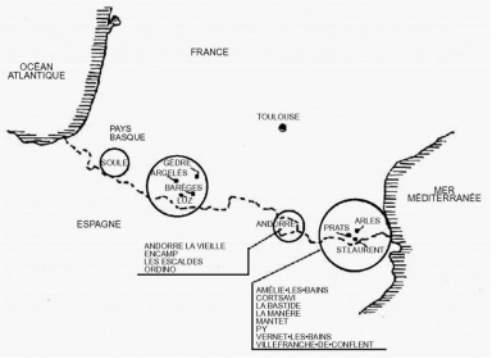

Fig. 18. Sites of Candlemas Bear Day celebrations in the Pyrenées. Source: Gastou (1987: 20).

In similar folk performances found across much of Europe, the Bear Son intermediary often appears dressed as a bear (Frank in press). As noted, ritual bear hunts are still performed in the Franco-Cantabrian region and the Pyrenees, where today they are acted out publicly during the period of Winter

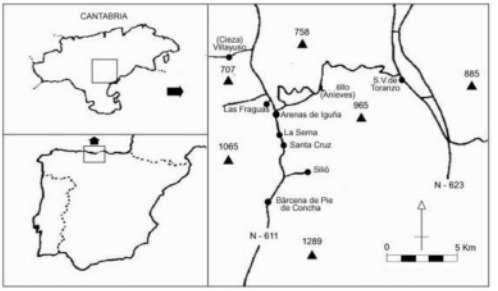

Fig. 19. Winter Bear Carnival Sites in Cantabria, Spain. Source: Molina González & Vélez Pérez (1986: 134).

[27] In making this statement, I would note that the Basque *Maskaradak* performance does not include any direct reference to a «bear hunt», although it has kept many other elements that seem to have been lost or misplaced in the Arles-le-Tech performances, most significantly the complexity of the dances themselves and their musical accompaniment, a topic that will be taken up at a later date.

Carnival.[28] For example, in Andorra the *Festa de l'Óssa* is celebrated both on December 26 and during Spring Carnival (Praneuf 1989: 62).

The Bear Festivals appear to be reenactments of real bear hunts that took place in times past: a ritual celebration of them. In other words they are performances that could be interpreted as portrayals of the hunting, death and resurrection of the earthly bear who, in turn, was seen as an ancestor. Earthly bears needed to be treated with great respect since the primordial bear (ancestor) was also seen as the «keeper of souls». There is a Pyrenean belief that in the Fall of the year the bear gathers up the souls of all creatures of nature, and puts them in its belly (womb) where they are kept until Spring when they emerge once again. If properly treated, the bear releases the animal and plant souls so that its human offspring can live abundantly. Assigning this function to the bear seems to correspond to the concept of a supernatural master or guardian spirit of all species of animals as well as the rest of the natural world, a common belief encountered among many native peoples (Brightman 2002; Hallowell 1926; Hämäläinen in prep.; Sarmela 2006).

There is also evidence that upon its death, the earthly bear's soul was sent back to heaven so that it could report to a higher authority, a kind of Celestial Bear figure, concerning the behavior of its human offspring. A positive report card guaranteed the health and well being of the Celestial Bear's human descendants. If the ceremonies were properly performed, in the Spring of the year the bones of the earthly bear would take on flesh anew in the form of bear cubs; and, as has been mentioned, the souls of all the other beings would be released by the bear (or perhaps by the Celestial Bear itself) in the Spring when it awoke from hibernation (Chiclo 1981; Elgström and Manker 1984; Fabre 1986; Lebeuf 1987; Tiberio 1993).

Hence, there was a highly interactive and yet very practical component embedded in the ursine belief system and the social practices emanating from it. The celebration of ritual hunts – including ritual performances that mimed the hunt – was a way of insuring that the community would enjoy good luck (and good hunting) during the rest of the year. Similarly, the celebration of an abbreviated form of the ritual performance was part of the «good-luck visit» itself, where the performers would go from one farmstead to the next with their «bear» or would move through the streets of the village, stopping at designated

[28] For a discussion of similar public re-enactments and «good luck visits» conducted on Candlemas Bear Day (February 2) and understood to form part of the World Renewal Ceremonies associated with the Spring Carnival period, cf. Frank (2001).