

INTP JOURNAL CLUB:

THE UNBEARABLE BARENESS OF BEARING

11/03/2022

- *The bare facts of ritual*
JZ Smith - History of Religions, 1980
- *Bearing the 'bare facts' of ritual. a critique of Jonathan Z. Smith's study of the bear ceremony based on a study of the Ainu iyomante*
T Kimura - Numen, 1999

Which is which?

Which is which?



- Jonathan Zittell Smith?
- An AINU man?
- A bear?

THE AINU BEAR FESTIVAL IYOMANTE

When mother bears are killed, newborn bear cub can be taken, welcomed to the village, and raised by the wife of ritual master



BEAR FESTIVAL

After the bear is one or two years old, ritual:

attach a rope to bear's neck and take it out of its cage

men shoot arrows at bear, women weep

men strangle the bear to death

take dead body of bear to altar

give gifts to dead bear

bear's body is dismembered

bear's head brought into the house

bear's flesh is boiled and shared

skinning the head and decorating the skull with gifts

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Why??

JZ SMITH'S IDEA

Leopards break into the temple and drink the sacrificial chalices dry; this occurs repeatedly, again and again: finally it can be reckoned on beforehand and becomes a part of the ceremony.

Kafka *The Great Wall Of China* (1946)

At Athens, Lysimache, the priestess of Athens Polias, when asked for a drink by the mule drivers who had transported the sacred vessels, replied "No, for I fear it will get into the ritual."

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Ritual is choice of what to make significant, and what to understand as simply "happening".

- Not everything can signify (that's paranoia)
- What signifies should not be blurred by trivial everyday happenings

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- In reality, hunt is messy, uses traps, etc.
- Gap between what hunt *ought* to be (what it means socially) and what it is

Inspiration: Pygmy chant:

1. Our spear has gone astray, O Father Elephant.

We did not wish to kill you.

We did not wish to kill you, O Father Elephant.

2. It is not the warrior who has taken away your life-

Your hour had come.

Do not return to trample our huts, O Father Elephant.

3. Do not make us fear your wrath.

Henceforth your life will be better.

You go to the country of the spirits.

We have taken you away, but we have given you back a different sort of life.

Against your children, Father Elephant, do not be angry. You begin a better life

JZ SMITH'S CLAIM ON BEAR CEREMONIES

- The hunter does not hunt as he says he hunts
- Bear festival represents the creation of a controlled environment where the perfect hunt can happen (face-to-face kill, respectful, with honor, etc.)
- Ordinary hunts then “recall” this ideal hunt: we know how they should be. Allows ordinary hunt to remain significant even though imperfect.

KIMURA'S COUNTERPOINT

- Western scholars are obsessed with the killing. This is not the central part of the ritual. Dismemberment is.
- Iyomante is not a sacrifice (the bear does not belong to sacrificer). It is a *gift exchange*
- Bear is the temporary animal form a spirit (kamuy) takes when visiting the human world.
- Dismemberment is “unloading” the gifts from kamuy, shared by the people, eaten during iyomante
- The kamuy is “helped to become spirit again” and sent back to spirit world with many gifts (sword, fish, arrows...)

CONCLUSIONS

- If Kimura's right, lyomante is not a perfect hunt but a gift exchange between two worlds, that has nothing to do with hunting. Is it still a perfect version of some other social event?
- Getting confused about what is central or what is accessory in the ritual (killing versus dismemberment) is precisely what Smith was talking about initially
- Bear rituals happen all around the Arctic people (Peijainen ritual in Finland, Koyukon people in Alaska). Different religious acts in each place?