

The Polar Bear's Great Spirit

by Moki Kokoris

Whether they are among the Inuit, Chukchi, Yup'ik, Nenets or Samoyed, all Arctic indigenous peoples have deep traditional and spiritual connections with the animals of the Far North, particularly the polar bear.

The Kets of eastern Siberia regard the polar bear as their ancestor and refer to it as *gyp*, meaning grandfather. In their culture, the bear is a spiritual guardian.

The Nenets of the Khatanga region in northern Siberia valued the polar bear's canine teeth particularly and wore them as talismans. The teeth were also traded in villages further south and used by the forest-dwelling people as protection against brown bears. The belief was that "little nephew" would not dare attack a man wearing the tooth of its powerful "big uncle."

The Inuit view themselves as equal partners with all the animals within their territories, but certain species are worshipped in a more spiritual sense because they are believed to possess divine powers. Seals represent intelligence and friendship, whales symbolize wisdom and good luck, and reindeer are associated with rain. But it is the polar bear whose characteristics of power, courage and endurance are most highly valued as is evidenced in Inuit legends, hunting rituals, religious ceremonies and art.



According to some Inuit beliefs, the Great Spirit who controls the caribou often takes the form of a white bear. Only a shaman possesses the power to influence that spirit to send caribou to the Inuit during times of starvation. Inversely, it is the “flying bear” spirit that can take the shaman to the sky or the sea from where he summons help for his people.

Another Inuit legend tells of a polar bear escaping a hunt by climbing into the night sky, and describes the three stars of Orion’s belt as the hunters who continue their pursuit in single file.

Although some traditions vary from village to village, the Yupik people of northeastern Siberia perform a special rite called *inegnintitku* immediately after killing a bear to prevent offending the bear’s soul. The polar bear’s head is turned toward the east, and the hunter kneels and addresses the animal’s head by saying, “You go back home now. The road to my house is very bad, so please visit us some time later.” Then a special ceremony of thanks and celebration begin.



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