

# POMO BEAR DOCTORS



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### INTRODUCTION

One of the most concrete and persistent convictions of the Indians of a large part of California is the belief in the existence of persons of magic power able to turn themselves into grizzly bears. Such shamans are called "bear doctors" by the English-speaking Indians and their American neighbors. The belief is obviously a locally colored variant of the widespread were-wolf superstition, which is not yet entirely foreign to the emotional life of civilized peoples. The California Indians had worked out their form of this concept very definitely. Thus Dr. Kroeber says:<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> A. L. Kroeber, "Religion of the Indians of California," present series, IV, 33, 1907.

A special class of shamans found to a greater or less extent among probably all the Central tribes, though they are wanting both in the Northwest and the South, are the so-called bear doctors, shamans who have received power from grizzly bears, often by being taken into the abode of these animals—which appear there in human form,—and who after their return to mankind possess many of the qualities of the grizzly bear, especially his apparent invulnerability to fatal attack. The bear shamans can not only assume the form of bears, as they do in order to inflict vengeance on their enemies, but it is believed that they can be killed an indefinite number of times when in this form and each time return to life. In some regions, as among the Pomo and Yuki, the bear shaman was not thought as elsewhere to actually become a bear, but to remain a man who clothed himself in the skin of a bear to his complete disguise, and by his malevolence, rapidity, fierceness, and resistance to wounds to be capable of inflicting greater injury than a true bear. Whether any bear shamans actually attempted to disguise themselves in this way to accomplish their ends is doubtful. It is certain that all the members of some tribes believed it to be in their power.

Pomo beliefs differ rather fundamentally from those here summarized. In the first place, the Pomo appear to know nothing of the magician acquiring his power from the bears themselves. Since they ascribe no guardian spirit to him, he is scarcely a shaman in the strict sense of the word. The current term "doctor," misleading as it may seem at first sight, may therefore be conveniently retained as free from the erroneous connotation that "shaman" would involve.

In the second place, the power of the doctor was thought to reside wholly in his bearskin suit, or parts thereof, and apparently was considered the result of an elaborate ceremony performed in its manufacture and subsequent donning. This distinctly ritualistic side of the bear doctor's practices removes him still more clearly from the class of the true shaman.

Thirdly, there is a detailed Pomo tradition of the origin of bear doctors. This story is cast in the mold of a myth; in fact, its initial portions may be taken from the current mythology of the tribe. Other parts are, however, remarkably unmythical and matter of fact. The resultant whole is therefore rather incongruous, and, in the form recorded, may have been somewhat influenced by the speculations of an individual. But the events which it describes agree so closely with the beliefs which the Pomo at large entertain concerning the practices of recent bear doctors that the question of the extent of the prevalence of the myth among the group is of less importance than the insight which the tale affords into the Pomo mind. Its many specific references make it a suitable introduction to the presentation of the other data

These peculiarities render a comparison of Pomo bear-doctor beliefs with those of other Californian groups desirable, but the published data from elsewhere are unfortunately too fragmentary to make such a study profitable at present. It has only seemed feasible to append some comparisons with Yuki and Miwok beliefs.

It may be added that the statements which constitute the body of this paper are the statements of native informants cited as representative of their convictions, and not as the opinions of the author. The degree to which the reputed practices of bear doctors were actually practiced is far from clear, as Dr. Kroeber has stated. Whether, however, they rest mainly, partly, or not at all on reality, they furnish interesting psychological material.

### ORIGIN ACCOUNT

The following tradition was obtained in January, 1906, from an old Eastern Pomo man and his wife. The husband stated that he had himself been a bear doctor at one time in his life. In his later years he became a noted practitioner of ordinary Indian "medicine," and was much in demand as a "sucking doctor." His old wife proved a very valuable informant on Pomo mythology, and it was while relating myths that the subject of bear doctors was mentioned and the fact developed that her husband had practiced this craft when a younger man. The incident led to a full discussion of the entire matter with the couple, and resulted in the recording of the following material. This was given by the Indians more as a personal favor than for any other reason, and was communicated only after a pledge that their story would not be spread about as long as the two were still alive. Both are now deceased, as is also the interpreter who aided in recording the material, so that there is no reason for longer withholding this information. Out of deference to the relatives of the three, it seems best not to name them in these pages.

Besides the myth, these two old people furnished the greater part of the descriptive information given in the remainder of this paper, but additional data from other informants have been included. Unless otherwise stated, the Pomo terms are in the Eastern dialect.

In the days before Indians were upon the earth, and when the birds and mammals were human, there was a large village at *danō za.²* These people were

<sup>2</sup> This is the site of an old Eastern Pomo village and is situated in the foothills about two miles northeast of the town of Upper Lake. It is located on the western slope of a hill and overlooks the lake.