

# Totemic Tradition and Identity of Korku Tribe: An Anthropological Perspective

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## Abstract

Tribal totemism is a cultural phenomenon that is deeply rooted in their societies. It encompasses complex symbolic systems where specific animals, plants, or natural elements serve as emblems representing ancestral connection, identity, and spiritual beliefs. Totems are revered as spiritual entities, representing a connection to ancestry, tradition, and the natural world. The choice of totem is typically rooted in mythological stories or historical events, and it serves as a symbol of identity, kinship, and shared values within the tribal communities. Totem is given special importance in the Korku tribe. Korku always remains alert and devoted to their totems. The Korku tribe believes that their origin is based on a particular totem, so they think that totem has a wonderful power that protects and warns them in times of trouble. Even a specific message associated with a totem may be a premonition of some event. The Korku people consider that the totem is inhabited by a supernatural power that controls their social life. In Korku society, women often have totem symbols tattooed on different parts of their body, especially on their hands. Korku follows all the rules and prohibitions related to his totem very sincerely. Like many other tribes, Korku also has beliefs related to the origin of the totem.

**Keywords:** Spiritual Beliefs; Religious Symbols; Supernatural Power; Clan; Melghat Region.

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## INTRODUCTION

The Korku is one of the largest tribe in Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra. In comparison to Maharashtra, the Korku tribe is more widely distributed in Madhya Pradesh. They are residing in the districts of Betul, Khandwa (early East Nimar), Devaas, Chhindwara, Narmadapuram (early Hosangabaad), and Sehore in Madhya Pradesh. *Mawasi*, *Bawaria*, *Bondeya*, or *Bopche*, and *Ruma* are the four primary endogamous

clans that make up the Korku tribe (Singh, 1998). The three communities of *Mawasi*, *Bawaria*, and *Bopche* are dispersed throughout the districts of Narmadapuram, Chhindwara, Betul, and Panchmadhi areas in Madhya Pradesh respectively. With the exception of these three Ruma community, is reside in Maharashtra's Amravati district. Korku tribe is geographically spread in Amravati, Akola, Gadchiroli, Nandura districts of Maharashtra and Betul, Khandwa, Chhindwara, Hoshangabad, Burhanpur, Neapanagar, Harda, Dewas, Khatgaon, Panchmarhi, and Pipariya districts of Madhya Pradesh, or it is also found in limited areas of Indian states like Assam, Chhattisgarh, and Jharkhand.

Koroku belongs to the Munda group of the Austroasiatic family. It is a tribe of the Munda or Kol group. The root *Koro* or *Kuru* means 'man' and takes the plural marker-kuto mean 'people' (Nagaraja, 1985). Thus, the word Koroku is a masculine word that means 'a lot of people' or 'group of individuals'. Thus, a human group is addressed as Koroku too. Another meaning of the word Koroku is that in the Koroku language, *Kora* means 'Path'. The Koroku tribe has lived in the middle of nature since the beginning, so he often used to pass through new paths passing through the forests and try to reach his destination. The main roads that used to be known, even in those unknown places where there was no way, the Koroku used to make roads for themselves and reach their destination, are also called 'Koroku'. The forests of the Melghat region mainly have the abode of the Koroku tribes, which offer the best example of living a permanent life around the forests. They get to see an unwavering sense of belonging in these forests, which is why there can still be immense peace between them. Even today in this region, tribes like *Koroku*, *Nihal*, *Pardhi*, *Gawli* (transferred cattleman), *Bhil* or *Bhilala* or *Tanttaya Bhil*, *Gond* or *Tanttaya Gond* (Cow Guard), *Rajgond*, etc. have their own indigenous or folk medical knowledge, which external people one can introduce new knowledge, and there are many things here that external society can increase its knowledge and also learn. The tribal population residing in Melghat has a very diverse and rich cultural heritage, which has co-existed with the flora and fauna of the surrounding forests.

According to anthropologists, Totem and Clan are related. Thus, a clan is a group of relatives with unilineal descent, typically consisting of ten or more generations, whose members feel they have a common ancestor but are unable to piece together their lineage. As a focal point for community identification, totems are frequently connected to plants or animals. From a tribal perspective, totems

are just titles, like *Gotra* or clan, bestowed by their ancestors to help them maintain their identity and which they pass on to their progeny to help them obtain a rightful place in society (Tripathi, 2018). The word totem originates from *Ojibwe*, an Algonquin tribe of Northern America, and refers to an object of an animal or a plant (Bongo, 2008). According to Webster's dictionary, totem means "a natural object, usually an object (such as an animal or plant) serving as the emblem of a family or clan and often as a reminder of its ancestry. It is a means of personal or spiritual identity." A totem is a symbolic object representing a person or group's beliefs, values, or identity. These symbols act as a visual language for the ties that bind communities. Totems are not just works of art; they also represent community cohesion, moral values, and spiritual ties. Nowadays, any symbol or item that has particular meaning or represents a set of shared values in a particular setting – from corporate culture to personal symbolism – can be referred to as a "totem" in some settings. According to anthropologist Levi-Strauss, totemic beliefs are intricate mental constructs that allow people to categorize the components of their culture and make connections between them and the natural world. Totemism is a belief system that is practiced throughout much of the world and asserts a relationship between social groupings (like clans or lineages) and natural elements (like plants or animals). Alternatively said, a totem is the spirit, holy item, symbol, or emblem of a people group that holds particular meaning in tribal life, such a family, clan, lineage, or tribe. For them, a totemic figure, symbol, mark, letter, ideogram, or any other identity, etc., is a reminder of their mythological history or lineage. An animal, bird, or other natural phenomenon is associated with a clan or lineage in a spiritual, religious, social, and cultural manner (Goswami, 2018). The Koroku tribe's totems, like *Jamunkar* and *Semalkar*, are named after trees, demonstrating how their culture and environment are integrated. In Koroku society, surnames tied to totems are not standardized; the same totem can be associated with multiple surnames.

### Objectives

- Exploring the historical evolution of totemic traditions, tracing their origins and development in Koroku tribe. Also, explore how totemic traditions have adapted or evolved over time and considering cultural shifts.
- Exploring the cultural and spiritual significance of totems within the Koroku tribe,

also exploring how their symbols contribute to their identity, belief systems, and social cohesion.

- Understand the origin of the myths, legends, and stories associated with the creation of specific totems and examine how Korku society interpret and attribute symbolic significance to totemic elements, and discuss the variations in symbolism across cultures.

## METHODOLOGY

The present paper is a qualitative research, which based on an Ethnographic study of the Korku tribe. Where snowball sampling, like non-probability sampling, was used to identify potential sources for the subject. Also, Participant observation, in-depth interviews with Korku people, and participation at cultural events are all components of fieldwork. Oral histories and traditional narratives are important sources of information that enhance the understanding of their totemic origins, symbolic meanings, and cultural identity. To emphasize the value of lived experiences and cultural quirks in the interpretation of totemic traditions, the study gives priority to the voices and opinions of the Korku community.

### *Study Area*

The fieldwork was conducted on the Korku tribe; a multitudinous tribe of Amravati district of Maharashtra. Data was collected from different villages of Dharni block and Melghat region. It is also a sub-district of Amravati district.

### *Myths about Origin of Clan or Totem of Korku*

The reason for the development of clans in the Korku tribe was an attempt to avoid marriages among blood relatives. Two folk stories are mainly prevalent in Korku society regarding the origin of their totem. The first myth is that, "In the beginning, when all the children of Korku reached adolescence, their sexual desires began to increase. Once all the boys and girls had gone to the forest to cut wood and when they reached in dense areas of forest, they started hearing different types of sounds. Attracted by these voices, the girls started running in that direction for satisfying their sexual desires. But, wherever she went, only her brother was visible. These scenes had stopped the sexual desires surging in his mind. Then suddenly a strong storm started coming there. Due to this, all the people present there hid somewhere out of fear. Some hid

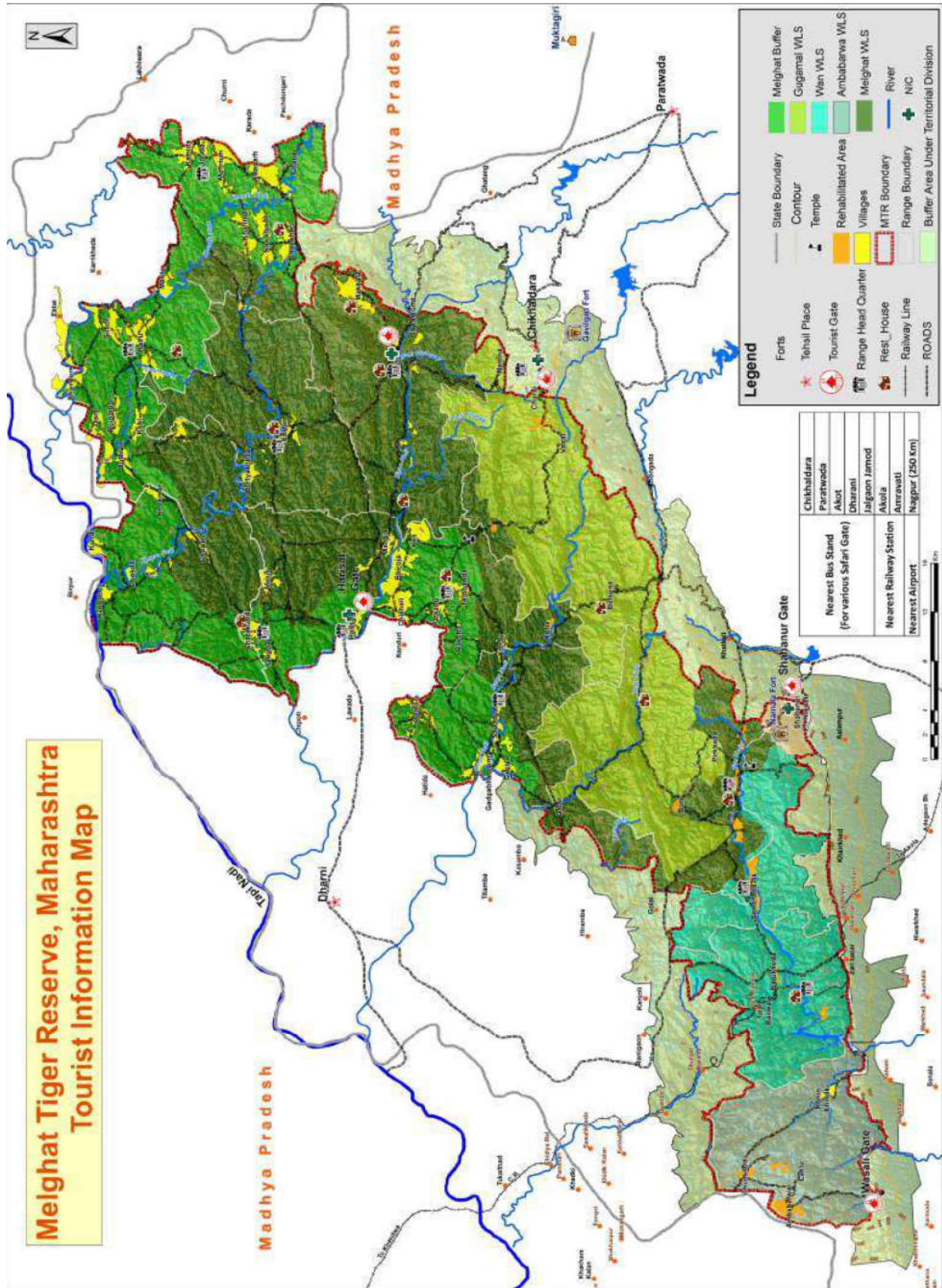
under the soil, some under a tree, some saved their lives by hiding in the leaves, and some saved their lives by hiding under the grass. When the storm stopped, everyone came out of their places and met each other. After meeting, everyone inquired about each other's well-being and asked who was hiding where. So everyone one by one started telling their hiding place. At that very moment they realized that the natural elements that had saved them were probably their ancestors". From then until today, they started having respect and reverence for the natural elements that had saved his life. At present, the determination of their gotra and totem is based only on the names of natural elements.

The second myth is that, "When humans were born, there were very few people in their group. When they reached adolescence, the feeling of sexual lust and desire was awakened in them. But, due to their common origin, they had a brother-sister relationship. When their minds started getting disturbed due to lust, they all together went to their favorite god or deity, 'Mahadev' aka Lord Shiva. Everyone narrated their pain to Mahadev, and he listened to them. After listening, he closed his eyes and took a breath twice or four times. After some time, he transformed him into a huge tiger. Mahadev, who was in the form of a tiger, roared and roared loudly. Just by his roar, the earth trembled, and loud sounds were heard in all directions. Seeing this situation, all the people present there started running here and there. In this rush of fear, someone climbed a tree, someone hid under the grass, someone jumped into the water, someone went into caves, and someone hid in the cracks of the ground. Everyone saved their lives by hiding somewhere. After some time, when the whole atmosphere calmed down, everyone came out of their hiding place and gathered at the same place from where everyone had separated. Mahadev had also come in his real form; he called everyone to himself. He said, I thought a lot about you people and had deliberately spread this illusion only for your benefit. If all of you answer my questions correctly, only then will I show you the right path. Everyone bowed and greeted Mahadev. Now Mahadev started asking this question to every person: 'Where did you go and hide?' So everyone took turns telling about their hidden places. At the same time, Mahadev determined their 'Gotras' (Clan's or Totems). For example, if someone climbs a Jamun tree, his clan is 'Jambu', the clan of those who hide in the bush is 'Jhara', those who hide in leaves, their clan is 'Sakom', those who hide in water, and their clan is 'Pani'. The people belonged to the 'Kandra' gotra.

After determining the gotra, Mahadev explained to everyone that 'you can marry anyone from any other gotra except the same gotra and can also fulfill your sexual satisfaction, and through this, you can also take your lineage forward'. After listening to Mahadev's order, everyone came back from there and started identifying themselves with that particular Gotra". This continues to exist even

today. It is said that a peacock protected a Korku from a snake attack; hence, the patronymic symbol of the concerned group is considered to be the peacock, *i.e.*, the dynasty peacock. Many stories related to gotra symbols are prevalent among the Korku's, which proves how different types of gotra symbols have become valid.

Korku Totem	Meaning or Symbols of the Totem's	Surname
<i>Akhandi</i>	The main pillar on which the house rests.	<i>Akhandi, Akhande, Lokhande</i>
<i>Bethe/Soso</i>	This is a <i>Bhilwa</i> tree. Their seda are called 'Soso Baitna'. Eating its fruit and applying its oil cures asthma.	<i>Soso, Bhilwa, Bethe, Baraskar, Bethekar, Belsare, Bhilawekar</i>
<i>Kaasda</i>	Soil	<i>Kasa, Kasekar, Kaasda, Kaasdekar</i>
<i>Attakom</i>	Egg	<i>Attakom</i>
<i>Sakom</i>	Leaf of <i>Sagaun/Teak</i> tree or Betel leaf	<i>Sakom, Sakomkar, Paankar, Paanse, Paalvi, Sakome, Sawalkar</i>
<i>Jhaara/Jhaada</i>	Grass	<i>Jhaadekar/Jhaarekar, Jhaawarkar, Jaawarkar</i>
<i>Kalam</i>	One kind of a tree	<i>Kalme, Kalam, Kalamkar</i>
<i>Kajlia</i>	One kind of a tree	<i>Kaajle, Kajelkar, Kaajlia</i>
<i>Chuthur</i>	A bird like a woodpecker	<i>Chutur, Chuture, Chaturkar</i>
<i>Jaambu</i>	Blackberry tree	<i>Jaambe, Jaamunkar, Jaambekar</i>
<i>Maausi</i>	Water by clouds and thundering	<i>Mausik, Mawaskar, Mawase, Maaushi</i>
<i>Taakher</i>	Cucumber	<i>Taakher, Thaakre, Thakur</i>
<i>Shilu</i>	A type of soft tree	<i>Selu, Shelokar, Saalve, Silawekar, Selukar, Selekar</i>
<i>Tota</i>	Stick of Barley, Corn and <i>Jondra</i> plants	<i>Tote, Dhote, Dhande, Tandil, Taandil, Taandilkar</i>
<i>Dhikar</i>	River fish	<i>Dhikar, Dahikar, Dhikaare, Dikaar, Raane, Dhigaar, Patorkar</i>
<i>Darshima</i>	Ficus tree	<i>Daarsimbe</i>
<i>Bhusum</i>	<i>Bosai</i> tree which is found in the forest is also called <i>Boseein</i> korku dialect.	<i>Bhusum, Bhusumkar, Bhaaskar</i>
<i>Bhusaria</i>	A kind of vine	<i>Bhusaria</i>
<i>Morerana/Mara</i>	Peacock	<i>Mara, More, Morerana</i>
<i>Kolya</i>	<i>Koyalari</i> , a vegetable tree	<i>Kolya</i>
<i>Khera</i>	A local tree which is very strong	<i>Kheria</i>
<i>Changri</i>	Forest grass	<i>Chogri, Changre, Changri, Chngri</i>
<i>Chekhrej</i>	Local tree	<i>Chekhrej</i>
<i>Lobo</i>	Local tree	<i>Lobo, Chobolobo, Liwaskar</i>
<i>Dhaapdi</i>	River bank	<i>Dhaapdi</i>
<i>Taangdi</i>	Net or Trap	<i>Taangdi</i>
<i>Dhaangdi</i>	Grass of the river bank	<i>Dhaangdi</i>
<i>Chilaati</i>	Thorny tree	<i>Chillate, Chilatre, Chilhaare, Silaati</i>
<i>Usraanva</i>	Hard soil	<i>Usraanva</i>
<i>Sutaar</i>	<i>Sutaar</i> tree	<i>Sutar, Sootar, Sutaar</i>
<i>Silmya</i>	Flat stone for washing cloths	<i>Siliya, Paathorkar, Patorkar</i>
<i>Bachhan</i>	Bull	<i>Bachhania</i>
<i>Kasandi</i>	Earthen pot	<i>Kasandi</i>
<i>Kansal</i>	Brass	<i>Kansal</i>
<i>Pendra</i>	Forest tree	<i>Pendra</i>
<i>Silaari</i>	A tree	<i>Silaari</i>



Sources: <https://www.magicalmelghat.in/public/website/pdf/Tourist-information-manual-2018.pdf>



Sources: <https://www.mapsofindia.com/maps/maharashtra/tehsil/amravati.html>

### Totems or Clans of the Korku Tribe

The study of the Korku tribe's clan totems is fascinating. The Korku tribe defines a totem as a system of moral obligations and paranormal convictions that creates a holy and paranormal bond between people and other natural objects. A totem is a type of collective identity among people that, according to some beliefs, honors a specific animal, river, vine, tree, plant, or leaf by seeing it as their idol, a representation of their clan, or a symbol of their family. Totem is highly valued among the Korku tribe. Korku treats the totem with respect and is constantly on guard. Consequently, none of them ever disrespects the clan's totem, and they all fervently preserve and honor their totem-related symbols. The totem is perceived by them as possessing amazing abilities that shield them from harm and alert them to impending events. Its particular utterance is considered a prophecy. The Korku people think that a supernatural force that governs their social life resides within the totem. 'Totem' is the object of their particular awe, devotion, and respect. In the Korku tribe, totems were developed as a means of preventing

blood relatives from marrying; as a result, there are a total of 36 clans or totems (Patil, 1993). The natural environment has a stronger connection to the Korku people's totems than do living creatures and material possessions. The Korku people do not damage, cut, or set fire to their totems. Since the Korku totem Takher is linked to the cucumber vine, its members eat cucumbers instead of harming the plant. The Jambu totem people are likewise in a comparable condition. The word Jambu comes from the blackberry, or Jamun. Korku totem names are derived from names of trees, fruits, leaves, animals, birds, creatures, rivers, mountains, grass, and soil, according to stories or myths about them. The list of Korku's totems, meanings, or symbols, along with their surnames, is as follows:

### Totemic and clan-related beliefs and restrictions

A clan consists of all the blood relatives from one mother's or father's side, spanning many lineages. An extensive family tree is called a clan. Any tangible object, creature, bird, animal, tree, plant, or other natural object that a clan believes it has a supernatural relationship with. Within the tribe,

a clan is regarded as a totem. Korku concurs that these natural factors are where they originated. Korku prohibits marriage within the same family because of this inherent totem system. Since one clan has just one totem, marriage is forbidden even in cases where two Korku tribes share the same totem. Individuals who follow the same totem are not allowed to be married to one another because they view each other as brothers and sisters, with whom every clan member shares a sacred bond. It creates moral ties among clan members. People who disobey totemic rules face social disapproval. The totem is respected; therefore people grieve when it passes away. Korku expresses gratitude to them and worships the symbols of their clan. For example, "*Kasandi's* do not kick earthen pots," "*Jambujo's* do not eat *jamun/blackberry* fruit," "*Shilu's* do not climb Marigold trees," and "*Kasada's* do not smear them with black mud." During holidays and other special events, totemic images are displayed in the home, and women get tattoos of their clan's symbols all over their bodies. On the walls of the home, totems are created in the style of graffiti. The '*Sidoli-Mandas*' are carved with clan emblems by the Korku people. By engraving clan insignia on the pillars, *Mandas* maintain a connection to their ancestors. Every old, traditional community exhibits this.

## CONCLUSION

Totem holds a particular place of significance among the Korku tribe. Korku treats the totem with respect and is constantly on guard. Consequently, they completely safeguard and honor their totem emblems, and no Korku ever disobeys their clan's totem. They think that the totem, and even the symbols, have a miraculous ability that may warn them of impending danger, protect them in times of need, and that the totem's particular utterance is a prophecy. They never, ever attempt to belittle their totemic emblems; even if they happen to glance upon their totem, they still proceed and offer a salute in observance of the totem's sacredness. Therefore, it is deemed sinful to kill, injure, and consume the meat of related animals and birds. For the most part, it qualifies as a criminal offense. Relationships are extremely significant to the Korku tribe.

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