Kabloona and Eskimo
in the Central Keewatin

BY F. G. VALLEE

Among the different cultural groups which make up the present-day Eskimo population of the Baker Lake region there was a lack of uniformity in the beliefs and practices pertaining to the supernatural. For instance, a spirit called by one name among this group might be known by a different name among that group. Despite these variations in content, the religion was similar in form among the different cultural groups.

Eskimo groups in this region shared the belief that nature was pervaded by forces which made things happen. These forces were personified in the form of various spirits, the spirits in turn having different properties and showing concern with different spheres of existence. For instance, among the Utkuhikalingmiut (Back River people) a female spirit called Nuliajuk controlled all of the wildlife and when certain rules of conduct were violated she would get angry and withhold caribou or fish from the people.

The rules of living which the spirits were much concerned about referred mostly to what we would call productive activity: hunting, cooking, sewing, fishing, and so on. In approaching each of these activities, in addition to such crisis events as birth and death, one had to be especially mindful of a host of rules, the violation of which would bring ill-fortune. It did not much matter that the violation was unintentional, the spirits would react angrily, although if the violation were intentional their wrath would be much more severe.

While it was not the aim that these taboos should serve a utilitarian purpose, one consequence of the observance of many of them was to facilitate getting a living, to conserve resources, and to curtail disease.

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taboo on pursuing one kind of activity while another is going on—for instance, trout-fishing and sewing while the fall caribou hunt was under way—resulted in a channelling of effort into the most crucial activity; the displeasure of Nuliajuk at seeing unused carcasses on the tundra acted as a check on over-hunting; the taboo requiring people to vacate the dwelling where a death had occurred and preventing people from wearing the clothing of the dead probably curtailed the spread of disease.

According to the literature on the subject, the Eskimos did not draw a sharp distinction between the sacred and the secular or profane. In their conception, every sentient being had a component which transcended the mere body and which is usually translated into English as the soul. This soul was regarded as sacred and eternal; sacred in the sense that it must be treated with great respect, eternal in that it never dies but survives either in the body of some other newly-born being, or in a disembodied form in some sphere other than the contemporary world. . . .

The moral sphere of relations between humans, so vital a part of the Judaeo-Christian religions, was not a prominent feature of those rules of living which the governing spirits were concerned about. The nearest equivalent the Eskimo had to the commandments was the set of rules and taboos pertaining to productive activity and to such events as birth and death, and these were purely ritual requirements, involving human relations only in an indirect way. This is not to say that the Eskimos were without a moral code. We suggest only that rules of conduct between humans involving such notions as filial piety, respect for the property and person of others, a willingness to share with others, and so forth, were not formulated in terms of supernatural rules, although their violation was reprehensible and brought sanctions here and now or later in life. One reason the Eskimo social organization proves so adaptable to change is that the norms of conduct governing man’s relation to man were not sanctified in explicit commandments deriving from the supernatural. . . .

In the folk-lore, too, the drastic punishments for incest, hoarding, and deliberate breaking of taboos are graphically described. Another lesson implicit in many folk-tales is that success in everyday life was regarded as a sign that the person was in good favour with the spirits, an idea reminiscent of the association between success in one’s career and membership among the saved characteristic of some Christian groups.

Contact between humans and spirits was effected through a person endowed with special powers, called an angakok among the Eskimos and usually called a shaman in the anthropological literature. Only the shaman could travel to and gain entry into the remote realms where the spirits dwelt. In order to do this he would have to voyage to the moon or to the