

Inuit Society

By Kimi Harta

The Inuit did not possess a highly organized society. In fact, organization in their society was almost non-existent and there were no divisions of rank or class. Eskimo tribes cannot be viewed as political entities, but instead can be seen as a generalization for geographical groups which shared similar languages and customs.

Politically, the family became the primary source of structure in Eskimo society. Kinship usually involved three generations from both the mother and father's sides. Functionally, these extended families were treated as one; therefore the action of a member was the responsibility of the entire group. These families also looked out for each other and oftentimes feuds erupted between different families as a result.

Marriage usually occurred as soon as a man could support a wife, and for females as soon as they reached puberty. The roles of men and women were very distinct, consisting of many taboos which weren't to be broken.

Inuit Law

The laws that governed the Inuit were simple. The most basic law of every settlement was that *"no one may without reason avoid the struggle for food and clothing. He who does so is not allowed to starve; but he is despised and looked down on by everybody"*. Land was seen as a communal property to be used for hunting by all. Similarly, game caught was divided among the community according to its size; the largest catches being split equally for all. Personal property was closely observed, following the guideline that *"possession is conditioned by actual use of the property"*. That is to say, as long as an item is being utilized then it shall remain personal property, but if one possesses an item and does not use it, then by right it should be given to someone who will be able to use it. However, laws did not exist as we in today's Western culture know it. They were not written, taught and enforced laws, but rather communal understandings. Punishment for breaching these laws was quite mild, usually aimed at injuring a man's position in society (through gossip, ridicule or ostracism). Eskimo punishments were not created to reprimand the criminal, but instead were efforts to reestablish the desired peace. The serious act of murder however, was the only crime which could not be amended by such simple measures. A blood vengeance was always required in return for the taking of a life and ongoing feuds between extended families were common results.

Needless to say, only a few leadership roles existed in Inuit society. Centered around the family, the eldest male served as an authority within each community.

Besides these familial leadership roles, no other central figureheads, such as a tribal king or leader, were empowered. This may be due to the fact that Eskimo societies were centered around cooperation and non-aggressive methods. To have a central figurehead would most likely impaired this liberal societal structure. However, there is one figure who may be seen as a power to be recognized and he is the shaman.

Magic healing and shamans

The shaman (or angakok) was thought to have special abilities in relating to the supernatural powers. The Eskimo believed that the universe was at harmony with its elements and that the natural and supernatural powers possessed a neutral position towards man. They believed the shaman had the power to influence events such as weather, food and illnesses. The shamans were therefore seen as possessing the abilities of curing the sick, controlling nature and predicting future events. Because of these powers granted from their positions, shamans were able to control others through the use of fear.

When illness fell upon an Eskimo, it was viewed in one of two ways. Either the sickness had been caused by the loss of one's soul or the intrusion of a foreign object (such as black magic). Despite the cause, there was only one way to cure the illness and that was to seek the aid of a competent medicine man or shaman. Often, in order to cure the sick, the shaman would exhibit his supernatural powers and "speak with a deceased relative of the patient, fly through the air in search for the soul, do battle with the spirit of another shaman". Such actions not only served to cure the ill, but to also further promote the awesome power of a shaman.

If death were to occur, then as in the birthing belief, the dying may not take his last breath in his hut or igloo, otherwise the home must be abandoned. Survivors would then undergo a series of rituals including abstaining from touching the corpse. Men in the same household would mourn for the deceased every morning and evening then perform a series of purifying processes before he may return to hunting. Females would also be considered as "unclean" and would be forbidden to *"lift her eyes to the sky, to look over the sea, to mention the names of animals of the hunt, to smile or speak above a whisper,"* etc. The dead are then honoured with feasts and gifts. This is to insure that the deceased will have a "happy existence" and that the survivors will continue to have good hunting.

The Hunt

Hunting to the Eskimos was a near equivalent to a form of religious determinant. From birth boys were taught to strive to be a good hunter, and likewise, girls were taught to dream of marrying a good hunter. Success in hunting was a sign of good life, and no success was a sign of moral disorder. The Eskimo afterlife is also imagined to be a paradise with choice game and an assured successful hunt without hard work. Therefore, it is safe to assume that for the Eskimo, hunting was so prominent in their everyday life that it took on deep religious values well beyond its more common practical importance.

Rituals

Rituals of the Inuit were not very elaborate. They were primarily concerned with birth, sickness and death practices and did not contain any religious rituals.

The rituals associated with birth are simple. An infant should be born in a hut separate from that inhabited by the family. If this is not done, then the hut must be abandoned. After giving birth, the mother is isolated for a period of time according to the sex of her child; one month for a boy and two for a girl. Eight days after the child is born he/she is given a sort of baptism by the shaman; this is the giving the child to a protective spirit and the assigning of a name. The naming of a child is very important since the Eskimos gave newborns the names of recently deceased family members. This was believed to be a type of reincarnation where the qualities of the dead person were taken on by the newborn. In fact, if the newborn is unwanted, she may be killed within the eight days after birth and it would not be considered murder providing that she is still nameless.

- *Kimi Hata*