

Callum Holley

Beverly Smith

Anthropology-271

12/2/2022

Stories from the Ice: Understanding Inuit Religion

Very few places on earth are as inhospitable as the North American Arctic. Indeed, with its complete lack of trees and little to no vegetation, life in the far north consists of a barren wasteland of snow, ice, and ocean. In this almost insurmountable environment, life is unstable, constantly changing, and almost always vulnerable, but a unique people called the Inuit have come to call it their home.

Inuit is a blanket term for a group of culturally similar peoples who inhabit Northwestern and Northeastern Canada, Alaska, and regions of Siberia. (Bonvillain, 499) In a landscape with little to no natural resources, the Inuit are almost entirely dependent upon the fruits of the sea. Almost every aspect of their survival, from clothing to tools, to sustenance, comes from animals such as seals and whales; The Inuit place great importance on their relationship with the sea, and although remarkably well adapted, they know they are at the mercy of their environment. (Bonvillain, 500) The Inuit do not view themselves as helpless; For them, religion and survival are intertwined. Unlike many religions that follow theology and dogma, many Inuit practices are meant to aid in their physical survival. Stories told for many generations have meanings that give insight into the culture they derive, and by looking at the ceremonial property of the Inuit, one can see how the natural world can affect spirituality and the human way of life.

To understand the fundamental belief system of the Inuit, Daniel Merkur's article *Breath-Soul and Wind Owner: The Many and the One in Inuit Religion* will be used in

conjunction with Nancy Bonvillain's *Native Nations: Cultures and Histories of Native North America*. Upon understanding the faith and its function, the most famous Inuit story, Sedna, will be dissected in Edmund Carpenter's article *Essay Review: Sedna's Challenge*. Different features of Sedna's story will be analyzed using the work of Jeffery Cohen's *Monster Culture* and connected to different beliefs in Inuit society that reinforced survival. To give further context to Inuit monster culture, two additional monsters, The Kalopaling and the Najakuksaluk will be examined in more depth. Finally, another story of the Kalopaling will give further insight using Franz Boas's firsthand account of the Inuit in *The Central Eskimo*. Finally, it will be seen how the structure and meaning of Inuit religious rituals and mythology derive from their core value of survival.

Like in many aboriginal American societies, the core of Inuit religion is held in a type of spiritual power. Daniel Merker calls this power *Sila*, a pan-Inuit word with various dialectical variations and meanings, but at its most basic definition, it means air. (Merker, 23) According to Merker, the Inuit believed that "In that air, therefore, gives life and without air, there is no life, the Eskimos believed that they are part of the Life-Giving Spirit, that each individual is animated by the Life-Giving Spirit, and that the part of his soul, that part which is the essence of all things living, is part of the ultimate deity *Sila*." (Merker, 23-24). Essentially, Merker explains that *Sila* was a life force in all creatures, not just humans. For the Inuit, since humans and animals had *Sila*, animals were also considered people. In this way, animals were highly revered, so when a hunter killed their prey, it was considered the killing of another person. Killing is not the most accurate word to describe hunting; according to Bonvillain, animals were believed to give themselves to humans, allowing their bodies to be eaten. (Bonvillain, 506) In order to thank the prey for their kindness, hunters followed a set of strict rituals. For example, a hunter's wife

would thank an animal's soul by giving it a drink of cold water by placing it in the mouth of the prey and often give a gift such as a knife or a needle case (Bonvillain, 506). If these rituals were executed correctly, it was believed the soul of the slain would transfer to another living thing, similar to reincarnation. However, if the ritual was not followed, the Inuit feared the animals would grow angry and not allow themselves to be caught. (Bonvillain, 506)

Why these rituals are followed is clear; Showing respect and conducting them granted the Inuit their source of food: the animals. Breaking or neglecting the rituals incited the fear of starvation, which would be the disappearance of the animals. Therefore, Inuit rituals were followed to have an adequate food supply, allowing them to survive. In this way, these traditions are a way to have some control over their survival in the inimical environment, which is crucial when one's survival is solely dependent on the sheer fortune of the hunt being successful. Indeed, Inuit rituals were a way to preserve the flow of the environment in a way that was beneficial to them, directly aligning with the other meaning of the word *Sila*: the order of the universe. (Merkur, 23)

Bonvillain states, "Inuit believed that all of nature is coordinating through balance, reciprocity, and order." (Bonvillain, 507). Evaluating Inuit religion through this interpretation of *Sila* directs the importance of rituals differently. Instead of a cause-and-effect relationship for sustenance, this form of *Sila* expands the religion further. Like before, the Inuit are trying to fortify against uncertainty, but this form of *Sila* suggests that instead of directly controlling the environment, the Inuit were tied to a greater cyclical pattern of life. Indeed, every natural occurrence was a part of it, and while the Inuit could influence life to be in their favor, they were ultimately subservient to it. Indeed, while Rituals gave a structure that was believed to protect

them, Sila was also an acknowledgment of the reality of their world; Sila gave an underlying base of reality to the religion, and this base was the uncertainty of survival.

By this point, one can see how Inuit rituals portrayed different ways of dealing with survival, but like many other religions, the Inuit had other mechanisms to confer ideas. For example, rituals are essential for everyday practices, but often how or why practices came about, or at a larger scale, how and why the natural world functions, is described best through mythology.

The Inuit had a large and diverse mythology, with their depth and richness helping to characterize the Inuit's place in their universe. Like many other aboriginal societies, one of the most prevalent and complex forms of storytelling is monsters. At their core, monsters are an effective storytelling device because of the information they confer. For example, one of the more prevalent myths is that of the Tunit: a race of primitive giants the Inuit were in contact with. (Boas 226) For some scholars, monsters like the Tunit hold valuable historical insight, with claims that the monsters were the remains of the extinct pre-Inuit Dorset Culture. (NBC) For others, though, the value of monsters comes from their literary and symbolic meaning. In his work *Monster Culture*, Jeffery Cohen provides seven insightful theses about what influences monsters and why they are effective storytelling mechanisms. His first thesis, titled *The Monster's Body Is a Cultural Body*, explains how monsters represent certain societies' fears. With the word monster meaning "that which reveals," monsters embody the fears of a particular place, time, feeling, or cultural moment. (Cohen, 4) Cohen's work is valuable in pinpointing the cultural significance of a monster and the values they represent; In effect, they are lenses into the greater Inuit culture and values. For the Inuit, the values and fears exposed by these monsters will derive from the importance of Inuit survival.

The first monster to be examined is also the most famous Inuit myth, the legend of Sedna. Sedna is the closest supernatural being to a goddess the Inuit created, and her story will be told through Edmund Carpenter's edition *Essay Review: Sedna's Challenge*. Sedna was a beautiful young woman whose father attempted to marry her off. Sedna rejected all of her suitors until a man disguised as a dog ran away with her. Sedna's father found her and took her in his boat, but while at sea, a great storm engulfed the two. Her father threw Sedna overboard to save himself, and while she clung onto the boat, he cut off her fingers. Sedna floated to the bottom of the seabed, and the finger she lost became the various animals of the sea the Inuit hunted. At the bottom of the sea, she transformed into a goddess, and according to the Inuit, she rules all creatures. (Carpenter, 83-84) It is important to note that, as previously stated, the Inuit are a large and diverse people, and there are many different renditions of this story. Instead of looking at their details, although insightful, the purpose of this story is more clearly seen because of their differences. In some, she is an unwanted daughter who rejects all men, and in others, she is a mother who is abandoned by her children (Carpenter 83-84). However, through commonly shared themes in each telling, one can see how Sedna reflects the Inuit's value of survival.

According to Carpenter, Sedna always refuses to marry and tries to leave her tribe (Carpenter, 84); Using Cohen's first thesis, one can see how that reflects a cultural fear. In the frozen north, every able-bodied person was needed for the tribe to survive, and by rebelling against them, she was putting her tribe in danger. Running away not only leaves the tribe with one less worker but endangers its future survival: there would be one less potential mother. The same result comes from marrying a dog or not marrying at all. In all of these versions, the message remains consistent: Sedna undermines Inuit survival values by abandoning them, and as a result, her father sacrifices her. This sacrifice reflects the harsh reality of arctic life; Sedna

became a liability to the tribe, and as stated by Carpenter, "Eskimos had many goals in life, but the first was always life itself, that other goals might be reached in turn." (Carpenter, 85), putting the father's choice rather bluntly. Even with other goals, such as looking after one's family, an Inuit's survival was always a top priority, and all other commitments had to be sacrificed to preserve it. The fear this sacrifice reflects is abandonment, and the story teaches the Inuit to stay loyal to their tribe. Survival is only possible within it, and the story saves its audience by scaring them with the consequences of abandonment. One is compelled to stay in the tribe because otherwise, like Sedna's father, the tribe will choose to save itself, and death will be unavoidable. In this way, Sedna's myth builds upon the critical theme of survival; It displays values that furthered it and creates fear that is used to sustain it. One could close her tale as a grim reminder of doing what must be done, but ironically, the power dynamic inverses.

It is crucial that after her abandonment, Sedna transforms into a goddess. Her fingers, which become the animals she rules, are also the Inuit's sole food source. Using Cohen's first thesis, the cultural fear this produces is vulnerability; The Inuit, who once had power over Sedna, were now entirely at her mercy. This situation is not only a microcosm of Arctic life but returns to both versions of Sila. The changing power dynamics in Sedna are just like the tumultuous way of the universe, and the result of Sedna's myth helps explain some of the hunting rituals previously discussed. Sedna tied all the animals in her hair when rituals were not followed, not allowing the Inuit to eat. (Bonvillain, 508) In order to save themselves, shamans would go into a trance and spiritually visit her dwelling. Bonvillain says, "When the shaman finally arrives at Sedna's dwelling place, the deity responds with anger because of people's misdeeds during the previous year, but after the shaman pleads with her, she relents and releases a sufficient supply of sea animals for the coming season." (Bonvillain, 508). Rituals are justified because of the power

of their enforcer, and although she was a force to be feared, Sedna still was a semblance of certainty. Appeasing Sedna was a way to ensure survival while disrespecting her explained starvation. Indeed, the very foundation of this story sits upon the Inuit's fight to survive, and every core theme or lesson it teaches either explains the nature of their world or attempts to further their lives.

Sedna's story is a valuable point of study; It forms the backbone of Inuit ceremonies and rituals and expands on Sila and why the Inuit depend on their environment. Sedna is a central pillar connecting physical survival with the spiritual world, but many other myths give rare and valuable insight into Inuit society.

The Kalopaling was a mythological human-like fish monster that wore the clothing of an Inuit. It was a kidnapper impersonating humans to lure lone children playing at the ice's edge. (*Inuit Mythology*) From a practical stance, one can see the value in this monster; it scared children into behaving. Arctic ice is dangerous and unstable, and although the myth could explain mysterious disappearances near the ice, it is logical that Inuit parents would use it to deter children from danger. This is especially likely considering Kalopaling only attacks lone children. Like in Sedna, the cultural fear on display is abandoning the tribe, which the myth teaches as resulting in danger and death. Indeed, the threat of abduction not only kept children away from the ice but inside the tribe, and we can see this type of lesson taught in another creature called the Naujakuksualuk: a giant seagull that attacks lone hunters. (*Inuit Mythology*) Both monsters keep the Inuit from straying too far away alone. However, a broader theme emerges in the relationship between Inuit monster mythology and the worlds they inhabit. Monsters serve as warnings for dangerous behavior; they are allegories of the dangers of the arctic, and the lessons they teach help the Inuit survive.

From what has been shown, monster mythology has a variety of uses. It can be a deterrent, which, when examined, reveals valuable practical information, or it can give structure and control to a very vulnerable people's way of life. These stories are vital forces that help supervise Inuit society, but it is curious how simple they are. Unlike many other religious traditions, Inuit mythology does not emphasize an afterlife. In the stories displayed, other more complex and abstract religious values, such as individual morals and tests of faith, are sparing to nonexistent. Some stories even lack a clear antagonist or religious problem altogether. In some ways, monsters fill this role, but it is essential to remember that they are vessels that embody the dangers of their environment. Even in more complex stories like Sedna, more abstract ideas like abandonment and vulnerability come from tangible knowledge that aids survival. With survival at the core of Inuit theology, one could argue that the environment is the true antagonist. The arctic itself tends to be the driving force behind plot progression, and in a way, monsters are just a reflection of it. Franz Boas portrays this notion well in the firsthand account *The Central Eskimo*.

Boas begins by describing an older woman and her grandson. He says that the two were very poor and had no kin. At one time, they were starving, and the boy cried. The grandmother scolded him to be quiet, but he refused, causing her to call the Kalopaling. The creature entered their home, and the woman gave the boy, allowing it to kidnap the child. (Boas, 212) Later, the Inuit had an abundance of meat, and "The grandmother was sorry that she had so rashly given the boy to Kalopaling and wished to see him back again." (Boas, 212) The grandmother asked a group of Inuit to help rescue the child, and they set off. They found the child playing near the cracks of the ice, but when they tried to take him, the child called the Kalopaling. The child refused to return to the grandmother who abused him, so the creature pulled the child under the

ice. The Inuit attempted to rescue the child several more times but only succeeded after taking him by surprise. In the end, the Inuit return home with the child, and he grows into a successful hunter (Boas, 212-213).

Similar to the Sedna myth, this story contains a duality of messages, but in both parts, the Kalopaling is not portrayed as the antagonist. In the first half, the conflict arises when the child is disobedient. As expected, the grandmother uses the Kalopaling as a threat to stop the bad behavior, and when the child does not, she willingly gives the child to the creature. Indeed, the monster does not steal the child, and yet again, the theme of abandonment returns. The story claims the child is sacrificed because of his disobedience, but it is crucial to remember that the family had no food. The poverty gives an underlying reason as to why the child was sacrificed: The grandmother had no food to support themselves. Indeed, like in Sedna, the foundation of this story is built upon sacrificing to survive; It has little to do with the creature but rather the fight against poverty and the arctic environment. This idea is proven later in the story; It is only after the Inuit have more food that the grandmother regrets her decision, insinuating that the sacrifice was not out of malice or trying to discipline the child, but rather necessity.

Like in Sedna, though, the power dynamics between the characters reverses. The child no longer wants anything to do with his abuser; in some way, the Kalopaling could almost be seen as protecting him. The Inuit must physically kidnap the child to bring him back, and the many failed attempts to rescue him prove the child was valuable to them. It is no coincidence that Boas uses the word "rashly" to describe the grandmother's decision: Children are necessary to continue the family and have immense potential. Ultimately, we see this potential come to fruition as the grandchild becomes a great hunter. Indeed, the first part of this story recounts the conflict of a desperate situation, but the second criticizes the choice made in the first. Although sacrificing the

boy brings gains in the short run, his rescue rewards the tribe in the end: he becomes a great hunter. This part tells its audience to invest in its youth, clearly illustrating how its message is to further the life of the tribe, but as a whole, the story is yet another microcosm of Inuit life. The constant sacrifice to survive and then helplessness at the mercy of others truly represented the "way of the universe". This cyclical game of life influenced Inuit rituals, Sedna, Inuit monsters, and the Inuit themselves. Indeed, the struggle against the environment characterized Inuit religion, and it is amazing to see how their core value of survival is expressed in the many myths and rituals of this culture.

It is disappointing to state that even with its cultural richness, Inuit ceremony and mythology have declined. Like many other native nations, the Inuit have been largely converted to western Christianity, with their way of life reflecting the influence of the west. Bonvillain says, "Wage work has become a primary livelihood in the North." Many careers available to the Inuit are through government agencies. (Bonvillain, 514) Indeed, the hunting way of life has largely disappeared with the establishment of permanent settlements, grocery stores, and the introduction of wage work. Nevertheless, the Inuit people continue to sit in an uncertain world. Bonvillain states, "Statistics compiled by the Canadian Census Bureau in 2006 reveal continuing high rates of unemployment in Inuit communities. The average unemployment rate stood at 19.0 percent, but many villages had rates exceeding that" (Bonvillain, 514), making it four times the Canadian national average in 2006. (Bonvillain, 514) Life is still as tough as it ever was for the Inuit, but with the lifestyle change, the stories of the past no longer have the relevance to benefit their survival.

This does not undermine the importance of their heritage thought; it is quite the opposite. The disappearance of Inuit culture only brings urgency to its preservation and documentation.

Until European colonization, the arctic was almost entirely devoid of outside interaction, meaning that Inuit religion is one of the most intact and unique in the world. It is feasible that one day, these stories will be one of the only ways we can remember this culture, and its unique nature allows one to find genuine common themes in disparate religions. Ironically, these common themes can be clearly seen in today's vastly different Christian Inuit. Jean L. Briggs's account of the Inuit in *Never in Anger* describes that "They are devout, if not exactly orthodox, Anglicans, and their religion is one of the two or three central interests in their life...". (Briggs, 48) Even under different faiths, religion is still important to the Inuit, demonstrating this topic's importance. Religion is a mechanism we use to cope with our lives, and the many different rituals and myths we create help explain the world and our place in it. For the Inuit, when western society was introduced, they transitioned to a religion that, at its core, reflected their new way of life. By looking at the past belief system of these people, we can not only see what was important to them but apply that same methodology to other societies.

Indeed, even transcending religion, examining Inuit Mythology helps further our understanding of stories. Although the cultural fears surrounding Sedna, The Najakuksaluk, and the Kalolpaling might differ in other societies, the methodology we use to examine them is universal. Mechanics that convey cultural ideas are essential to any storytelling medium, and studying Inuit mythology demonstrates that even in a place as isolated and desolate as the Arctic, the myths we tell are effective.

In the end, Inuit Religion is the story of a people trying to survive in a hostile world. To structure this story, they created the concept of Sila and practiced a ritual system that helped aid in their survival. Many different characters, such as Sedna, the Kalolpaling, and the Najakuksaluk, populate this story, and by using the work of Jeffery Cohen, we can analyze their

meaning and place within it. On the outside, it seems as if the story of traditional Inuit Religion is coming to an end, but perhaps it is only changing its form. At its core, surviving the “way of the world” has always been the priority, and to this day, the Inuit remain standing. Even with the introduction of new religion and ways of life, perhaps the legacy of tradition will be the philosophy to carry on. The Inuit have braved the cold for so long, and they will likely continue to do so for many more years.

Works Cited

Bonvillain, Nancy. *Native Nations : Cultures and Histories of Native North America*.

Second edition., Rowman & Littlefield, 2017.

Carpenter, Edmund. "ESSAY REVIEW: SEDNA'S CHALLENGE." *Dialectical Anthropology*, vol. 7, no. 1, 1982, pp. 81–89. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/29790060>. Accessed 21 Oct. 2022.

Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome. *Monster Theory Reading Culture*. University of Minnesota Press, 1996.

Dorset DNA: Genes Trace the Tale of the Arctic's Long-Gone 'Hobbits'. *NBC News*. 28

August 2014.

Franz, Boas. (1888) *The Central Eskimo* (p. 212-213)

∴ ---. www.inuitmyths.com/qallupilluk.htm.

∴ ---. www.inuitmyths.com/monstergull.htm.

Merkur, Daniel. "Breath-Soul and Wind Owner: The Many and the One in Inuit Religion."

American Indian Quarterly, vol. 7, no. 3, 1983, pp. 23–39. *JSTOR*,

<https://doi.org/10.2307/1184255>. Accessed 23 Nov. 2022.