

## CHANGES IN THE SEDNA MYTH AMONG THE AIVILIK

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The spiritualistic system of the Aivilik Eskimos requires no dichotomy between "natural" and "supernatural", but is linked practically with nature, although it implies occasional states of ecstasy which can be celebrated only in the language or myth. The Aivilik experience no need for postulating an order which operates by laws greater than, if not in opposition to, those which are apparent in the visible world.

All elders agree on the existence of spirit-beings, and their agreement is possibly only on the supposition that this has been demonstrated. However, belief in non-human personalities does not depend alone on the authority of elders; hosts of facts are completely incompatible with the non-existence of ghosts and the like. The Aivilik go far beyond mere faith. They encounter daily proof of the existence of such beings, many of whom they have actually seen.

Analysis of their spiritual beliefs reveals a pantheon of three orders based on function rather than graded power: first, there are the spirit forces on earth; next, a mid-pantheon of spirits above the earth, generally personifications of nature-forces; and finally, there is *Sumna*, protectress of sea mammals. In recent years *Sumna* has been replaced in this prominent role by the Christian deity, an upper, single force controlling the universe, and has been relegated to the role of the Evil One who personifies all the sins and vices held lowest in the esteem of the Aivilik.

Occasional prayers, threats and offerings, addressed to the unseen, or at least rarely seen, spirit world, commence on earth and run upward to the Supreme One. Specific rites fall loosely into three groups according to their function of bringing man into rapport with particular spirit forces. Thus, certain rites are addressed to the spirits of slain beasts, others to the souls of dead men. Next there is a mythology involving nature-forces intermediary between human society and the universe at large, for in Aivilik thought, all storms and winds, thunder and lightning, sun and tides, depend on the controlling powers of spirit beings. And third, a declining number of *angakok*, or medicine-men, are performances, characterized by seances where power and knowledge are derived from beings not earth-bound, and dominated by the idea of an ecstatic trip to the depths of the ocean, are still held. The remaining rites fall loosely under the general rubric of communications with the Christian deity, who, in his indefinable supremacy, resides in the sky dome.

Traditionally, this pantheon had no graded hierarchy, either spiritual or spatial. *Sumna* was an inmate of the sea; other deities resided in the firmament; still others roamed the earth with man. All differed, but were essentially of equal status. Since the introduction

of Christianity, however, the space above the earth has been divided into various concentric circles, with the uppermost considered the habitation of God. Today this orientation sways between the spiritual and the spatial, with the stress slightly, though unintentionally, more on the second than the first. But this must be accepted with caution, or at least with the understanding that we are dealing with later interpolations deliberately calculated to conform to Christian dogma.

Most prominent of all spectral creatures are *Sumna*, mistress of the nether world, and her husband, to whose lot dead Aivilik fall. *Sumna* was once a coy maiden who refused all suitors until at last a petrel won her heart by false promises. Embittered by her new life of discomfort and abuse, she conspired with her father to flee her island home. When the petrel discovered his loss he pursued them in a kayak and humbly begged to be allowed to embrace his children. "How could a bird have human children?" they mocked, and the petrel hung his head and fell behind. Almost immediately a giant gull appeared and, swooping down on the umiak, kept repeating, "How could a bird have human children? How could a bird . . . ?" Each time he dived closer and closer, the beat of his wings turning the calm sea to storm. The terrified father, intent on saving his own life, cast *Sumna* overboard. But she resolutely clung to the gunwale. In desperation her father cut off her fingers, joint by joint, and they fell into the water to become the animals of the sea. Still she clung to the Umiak, until at last her father struck out her left eye. Then she sank to the lower world where she lives today as protectress of the sea animals and guardian of the souls of the dead. All Aivilik who have seen her agree that she is a Cyclopean creature, *toogoyuktuk* in color (blue-green, no semantic distinction being recognized). For reasons unknown and by means unexplained, her husband is now a huge and hairless dog, who, Cerberus-like, guards the doorstep of her estate, keeping the living out and the dead in.

The traditional relationship between *Sumna* and man is clearly demonstrated in the following incident. Some years ago when game was scarce, an Aivilik family consisting of an old man, his two mature sons, and their families, was forced to separate and hunt in distant parts of Southampton Island. Months later, when the extended family was reunited, the elder son learned of the drowning of his brother. Yet he knew that the young hunter had led a good life—had been respectful to both beasts and deities. His death was obviously unjust. And so, announcing, "I am sure who took him," he picked up a walrus penis bone (symbol of obscenity and effective bludgeon), and walked across the water out of sight. When he reappeared, his brother was walking on the water behind him. The rescuer related that he had gone beneath the sea, stepped over the growling dog on *Sumna's* door-step, and entered her house. There he threatened her with the club until she released his brother.

In former days, the Aivilik had no end of stories like this. When, in spite of respect paid to animals, they found themselves starving



because *Sumna* withheld the game, hunters went below, threatened her, twisted her arm, and demanded that she supply them with animals to hunt. Or if man himself was at fault, an *angatkok* might placate this handless creature by combing her tangled hair. In either case she would yield, for she was by no means an absolute and implacable ruler. Rather, *Sumna* and man were members of the same society—the society of life—and were governed by the same rules of conduct.

Though never expressly formulated, the constitution of this society forbade the spiritual killing of any member. *Sumna*, man and all other members, were bound by this covenant of respect for life. The life of man or beast could not be taken without justification. Violation of this sacred constitution by any member was subject to rigid punishment. Whenever hunters offended the souls of animals by neglecting to observe the post-mortem rites which would assure the animals immortality, *Sumna's* retaliation—starvation, freezing, drowning—was ineluctable. And whenever *Sumna* violated this covenant by taking the life of an innocent hunter, they in turn never hesitated to rebuke or punish her.

For the Aivilik, then, deistic powers did not surpass man's but merely prevailed in specialized fields. *Sumna*, for example, was quite limited in her range of knowledge and was easily deceived by man. Far from being superhuman, she shared with him all the ordinary human attributes of sensation and emotion—pain, weakness, unhappiness, joy, and so on. She was pleased with offerings and with thanks; she was ashamed if accused by men of having acted unjustly; she was angry when men tried to cheat her, insult her, or withhold from her wards prescribed offerings from the chase.

The myth of *Sumna*, then, reflected a belief in the unity of all life. Clearly, this was no idle tale prone to revision or rejection. On the contrary, it was deeply infused with, indeed based upon, emotional attitudes of great strength and practicality. This is borne out by the way in which Aivilik converts to Christianity have failed to wipe the slate clean of spirits. Today there is recognition of the existence of a god superior to and more powerful than *Sumna*; and there is recognition of Jesus as the Son of God who came to save the world from sin. But there is no acceptance of the idea that *Sumna* and the old spirits do not exist. The missionary says they are false, and the Aivilik accept this as meaning that they are evil and deceitful or simply outworn and inefficient. But the Aivilik still believe that the ancient spirits exist and can interfere in the affairs of men if allowed to do so. In fact, some hold that *Sumna*, angered at her rejection, punishes her former adherents by famine. This is the standard explanation for the recent depletion of game animals. It is thought that she is restrained from further revenge only by the powers of the new deity.

Christianity, then, does not stand alone in the new spiritual order. Catholicism has, in a sense, not destroyed but merely enlarged the native pantheon. The priest strives to root Christianity in native soil in accordance with the dictum of Gregory the Great, viz., to eradicate

only the specifically pagan and leave everything useful undisturbed. Such is not the case, however, with Anglican converts who are pledged to avoid "untruth", meaning the dangerous exercise of poetic imagination in pagan myth and allegory.

To both Catholic and Anglican converts, *Sumna* has become synonymous with the Devil and is now referred to as the "Evil One" or the "Goddess of Evil". This transition has not been sharply contested by the missionaries. For one thing, Christians, though they cannot dispute with God, traditionally at least, can bargain with the Devil. Furthermore, *Sumna's* home, being located below and regarded as a prison for offender's souls, is easily construed as Hades.

Yet even as the Devil or Evil One her role is still paramount. Not only is she frequently seen, but in recent years she has been attacked twice. In the winter of 1949-50 an Aivilik hunter, his wife and mother, were travelling north by dog sled when they found their trail blocked by a great white phantom that bobbed on the snow before them. In actuality, it was a hydrogen-filled radio-sonde balloon that had been sent aloft by a government weather station. But to the terrified natives it was a manifestation of everything evil, consummated and expressed in a form which stood less than thirty feet before them. Frantically the hunter fired—again and again, but his bullets merely pierced the rubber, permitting just enough gas to escape to keep the balloon bobbling wildly. In desperation he drew his knife, sprang forward, and destroyed it. Until accurately identified, the torn balloon was triumphantly exhibited as the Devil in every camp on the Island.

About six years earlier the United States Air Force installed a blinker on Bear Island just off the south coast of Southampton. Evarshar, thinking it was the Devil *Sumna*, harnessed his team and went out on the ice where he shot out the beacon.

In aboriginal Aivilik thought, there does not appear to have been any such division of spirit forces into those of "good" and "evil", at least, in our sense of the words. There were ghosts and curses, familiars, and charms. But all these came under the head of Power rather than Will, and a deity evilly disposed one moment could always be propitiated or coerced into a favorable attitude the next.

Under Christian influence, however, deity attributes have become more stable, and have tended to divide the spirit world into opposing camps. Certain evidence argues for the presence in the new pantheon of a Goddess of Good whose name is too holy to be pronounced. Aivilik are obliged to refer to her by periphrases and even periphrases of periphrases. At times she is merely called *Pakima*, "above". This circumlocution, plus the confusion of a syncretic religion, makes it difficult to say more. That she resides in the sky realm, all agree but beyond this few will venture an opinion. To what extent, if any, this deity originated in, or was influenced by, Christian theology, it is difficult to say. I suspect that the Goddess of Good is actually a combination of the Virgin Mary and *Sela*, "weather"—controller of nature. Nevertheless, she is a very real thing to the modern Aivilik.



Her presence has introduced into their thought the element of dualism which interprets the cosmic process as a struggle between Good and Evil principles where the issue has not yet been decided. Although Christian orthodoxy insists that the issue was decided, once and for all, by Jesus on Calvary, dualistic heresy persists in the convert's mind and is symbolized in his mythology. Thus, all Aivilik believed Monapik when he recently told of having come upon the Goddesses of Good and Evil as they fought over the soul of a dying woman. Inasmuch as the woman had observed during her lifetime the ancient taboos, it was the Goddess of Good who won possession of her soul.

Today most Aivilik like to burn candles in little bowls of ruby glass before statues of a clear-skinned young woman dressed in blue with stars about her head and a child in her arms. The attributes of this member of the Christian family are remarkably close to those of *Sumna*, Goddess of the Sea Animals, who was worshipped before Christianity reached this land. For *Sumna* was the fruitful sea itself, sister of *Sela* who symbolized the natural order. Behind both lay a profound and healthy respect for fertility and life. Aivilik converts, in kneeling at the altar of the new deity, continue to worship those virtues which their forbears considered divine.

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Hotham Inlet, which receives the combined waters of the Kobuk, Nostak and Setawik rivers, escaped the observation of Kotzebue during his trip, in 1816, into the body of water bearing his name, and was discovered by Captain F. W. Beechey, R. N., of H. M. S. Blossom in July of 1826. He named it for Sir Henry Hotham, K. G. B., a Lord of the Admiralty (Beechey, 1831, p. 342).

An estimate of the population of Hotham Inlet may be obtained from Captain Beechey's report as he mentions that 150 men in boats approached the ship's barge at one time to trade. This was in July of 1826 and when the barge returned to the same area in September not a single tent was left at the barge fort village that had apparently existed there earlier in the summer (Beechey, 1831, pp. 351, 441).