

Beaver Dreaming and Singing

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Diamond Jenness must have been a magnificent field worker, for the description he gives us of the Indian worlds he visited are rich in the kind of detail that only a trusted and sympathetic friend would be told. In his fine ethnography of the Sekani Indians he gives us fifteen pages of vivid first person accounts of Sekani religious practice.¹ We are told of people who died and returned to become medicine men, and of a variety of personal medicines and spirit quests. Because Jenness's account is so detailed, concrete and true to what he was told, one glimpses that the Northern Athabaskan conceptual world must be more complex than their social institutions, a world of totemic thought set in a shamanic cosmic structure. Nonetheless, the descriptive excellence of Jenness's work and a great deal of North American ethnography in the Boasian tradition leaves the reader tantalized but curiously unfulfilled because of its inability to find an appropriate conceptual framework with which to translate the meaning of what it describes.

I think it right that a paper in honour of Diamond Jenness should attempt, in terms relevant to our present needs and understandings, to discover and translate the meaning of totemic and shamanic symbolism among the Beaver Indians, close neighbours of the Sekani, with whom I have worked. Like the Sekani, the Beaver have men and women who have died and brought songs back from heaven as well as, in Jenness's words, "the belief that man and the animal world are linked together in some mysterious way and that animals possess special powers which they may bring to man if he seeks them in the proper manner."² As Jenness intimates, these two religious forms are manifestations of a single cosmic order and the underlying link between the two is in dreaming and songs. Elsewhere I have written of the Beaver

“messianic” practice as a form of shamanism;³ in this paper I will concentrate on explaining the underlying medium of dreaming and singing that connects Beaver shamanism with the quest for medicine power.

What I know of Beaver thought is incomplete both in detail and adequacy of conceptualization, yet in the short space of this paper I will have to ask the reader to take some of my statements on trust, particularly where an interpretation comes from knowledge of a large body of myth which I cannot reproduce here. The reader’s problem in following what I say directly parallels my problem in following what the Beavers say to me because in both cases the context that gives an event meaning is an extensive culturally patterned background of experience. For a participant in Beaver culture, the symbols penetrate every level of experience but the outsider attempting to enter that world of symbolically mediated experience must find shortcuts through abstractions within the context of his own culture’s symbolization. A Beaver Indian cannot “tell you the meaning” of the vision quest and its symbols in your terms unless he has a symbolic key to unlock your experience, but he can tell you about it in the terms through which he conceptualized it, those of his own experience and his culture’s symbols. The anthropologist must take on trust that it is meaningful and find experiences and symbols that will bridge the cultural gap. In this paper I shall attempt to communicate to you something I know is meaningful to both the Beavers and to me.

My background as an anthropologist attempting to translate Beaver meanings includes my formal education, my experiences in Beaverland and my experiences teaching Beaver ideas to others. My understanding of Beaver thought depends upon my willingness to take what they tell me seriously and personally (learning from them rather than merely about them), and my ability to find a symbolic framework that will encompass their experience, my own and yours as well. There is no qualitative difference between the symbolic transformation involved in bridging the gap between my experience and yours and the transformation involved in bridging the gap between mine and theirs. We are all humans enclosed in the ultimate solitude of our subjectivities, but as humans we all share the common capacity for giving each other experiences through the interaction that symbols make possible.

You and I cannot directly enter each others' experiences and I cannot recreate within you either my own life history or that of a Beaver Indian; but I can abstract and describe, through a medium common to our cultural understanding of each other, my understanding of the experiences of Beaver life within whose context their dreaming and singing is meaningful. The meaning of their symbols is neither imposed upon nor derived from but is rather inherent in the experiences of their lives. Thus, before I talk of symbolic abstractions I must give you some idea of the way in which the reality of Beaver life is constructed. I will talk about how Beavers learn about being human. Being a male myself, my account will undoubtedly show a male bias and be more from the perspective of a boy growing up in Beaverland than that of a girl. Crossing cultural gaps seems enough of a task at the moment without also crossing sexual ones. My neglect of women in this account does not imply that Beaver culture neglects women.

Human infants live in a world of experience unmediated by symbols, and Beaver infancy is not sufficiently discriminative from our own (and no more easily fathomable) to warrant discussion on my part. I shall begin at the stage of life where experience begins to encounter symbol. A Beaver child generally sleeps with his mother and father until he is weaned, on the birth of a new baby. Later he may sleep with an older brother, uncle or grandfather until he moves into a camp that some unmarried boys have set up. His sleeping is as important to him, in its own way, as his daytime activity. Every night and day of his life impresses upon him, gently and unselfconsciously, the unquestionable and almost unspoken realities of existence. Night comes when the sun sets (*sa na'a*, literally "daytime sun goes under"), each sunrise and sunset moving "one chicken step" toward its winter or summer time turning point, and each day increasing or decreasing in length according to season. While night lasts, the night time sun, *hatlege sa* or moon, is seen as it follows its own revolutions. It is the shadow of the sun just as "ghosts", about which a child hears much talk, are the shadows of men. The people always sleep toward the sunrise place in anticipation of its return. The experience of sleeping in that way is so much a part of the back-

ground and fabric of life that a child can hardly be consciously aware of it, yet as he will discover at some point in his life it is as important to him, and as unobtrusive, as his breathing.

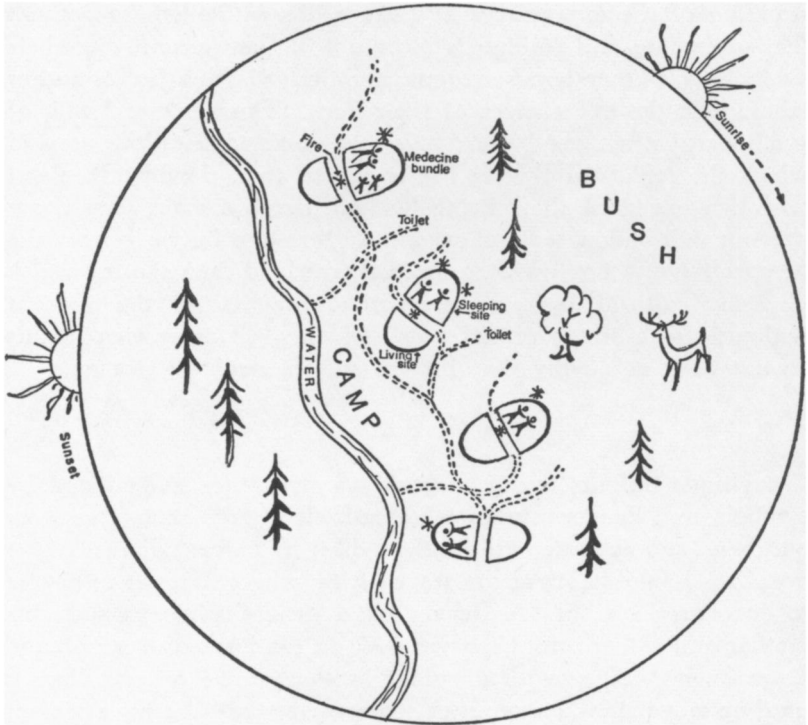


Figure 1 Beaver Camp

A typical Beaver nomadic camp is shown in figure 1. The houses are a sort of double lean-to with a fire in between the two halves. At times during the winter people may live in circular log tipis, more recently in log cabins. Now they rather confusingly find themselves in prefabricated government designed pastel plywood boxes set in rows. The double lean-tos are still in use by some of the people some of the time, and I have lived in and around camps like the one shown here. Children do not seem to know that they sleep facing the sunrise place because, I think, they do not yet know what it means. Yet it is obvious to a child as he

observes countless camps set up and struck on the family's yearly rounds that the orientation (an appropriate symbol from our own culture that you may have used without knowing what it meant) of a camp is part of the way things are. The living space of the camp and its relation to the cosmic cycles of sun and moon, form a constant backdrop for the large and small events of a child's life.

Children can recognize men before they can understand them, for their understanding must ultimately come from within their own experience. A man is unmistakable because of his medicine bundle hanging behind where he sleeps and testifying to his existence even in his physical absence. Children are not told directly about the content or meaning of a medicine bundle, but many people my own age told me that as a child they had fooled around with the bundle of some relative and received a terrible fright because there were things in it that moved; they were alive. The medicine bundle usually hangs from one of the poles of the lean-to above where a man sleeps, and he leaves it there during the day when he is away from camp. Children know, from the very special way it is handled and referred to, that it is somehow connected with the deepest powers of an adult's understanding. In my own experience of Beaver camp life, the medicine bundle seemed a constant presence, and I picked up the quality of respect with which it is treated long before I knew anything about its symbolic meaning. A child feels its power as he might feel the power of a gun from the respect with which adults treat it.

Sometimes a child will find himself precipitated into the powers of the medicine bundle long before he begins to understand it. Nearly every Beaver child has at some time in his life been seriously ill, and in this uncertain and otherworldly state of mind has been touched by someone's medicine bundle. When this happens, the familiar yet mysterious medicine bundle leaps out at him from its place in the background of his everyday experience and touches him with the force of life and death. It is a reminder of the power that exists in the universe and the understanding that he will seek as his experience grows.

Children learn from experience that the space behind where a man sleeps, behind his medicine bundle, is somehow different from

the space in front of a camp. When families camp together no-one puts his house between another's house and the sunrise place. There are no trails behind the houses. As a child learns the spaces within which people order their lives he is also learning the spaces within which experience becomes symbol.

I am told that traditionally men and women, boys and girls used different places for leaving and entering a house; men to the north and women to the south. The most important difference I observed between men and women in their use of space had to do with a distinction between bush and camp. On the camp side of a house there are trails connecting the houses of a camp together, and leading from each to wood, water and toilet. Everyone is free to walk these trails and it seems natural to follow them rather than strike out across unbroken terrain. On the other side of the house there are no regular trails. Men and children may walk there but women, particularly women who might be menstruating, may not cross behind where a man sleeps, behind his medicine bundle. This means that for every camp there is a camp area where cooking, hide-working and other domestic activities take place, and a bush area that is exclusive to the hunters. The camp is associated with women and family life and the bush with men and the animals they mysteriously go out to hunt and miraculously bring back to be transformed into food by the women.

From an early age children hear stories of giant animals that existed long ago and hunted men. They are told that these animals are still sometimes seen in the bush, that the culture hero, Usakindji, both divided and dispersed them in their present form and drove them to a place beneath the ground. The bush is a place that both surrounds and sustains every camp through the actions of men, and also the place where the creatures of the stories actually exist. It is an ultimate reality testified to by the past and surrounding the present; a place of living symbol, a mythic dimension. Ghosts are also found in the bush but they can only go around to the places where people used to camp along the trails of their own past lives. They pass through the bush but are not of it and seek the camps that are no longer there.

As children learn the physical layout of the world in which they play they also begin to observe its immaterial terrain. Certain

spaces belong to the activities of women and others to the activities of men. The medicine bundle links a man to the bush realm and the sunrise place, the world where giant animals may still be found and from which the actual animals he eats every day have come. Hardly a day passes without some mention of a dream and its possible relation to past, present or future events. Nearly every time a hunter brings meat into camp he connects the event to his dreaming and his dreaming is related to the bush through his medicine bundle. The North and East are associated with men, the South and West with women. This symbolic terrain is laid out in a variety of ways in the stories a child hears.

Singing and dreaming and eating, sunrise and sunset, birth and death, winter and summer, bush and camp, myth and experience, build into a totality as a child grows. Dreaming, medicine bundles and songs are a mystery to children but not an exclusive one. They know them in their way and as they grow older they grow into knowledge appropriate to their new experiences. Even children under five often find themselves away from the trails of camp and into the bush realm, a symbolically charged transformation even if they are barely out of earshot of their people. When it is discovered that a child has wandered into the bush, the parents think and dream about what animal might be calling him. As children grow older and begin to learn the stories, they are prepared, told to fast and abstain from drinking water, and sent out early in the morning to spend time alone in the bush. By the time a child is eight or ten he is ready to receive experiences that will change the character of his later life.

I cannot tell you what "really happens" to children in the bush, just as they cannot tell other people their experience directly. I was told that if a child has the right thoughts, if his head is in the right place, a medicine animal will come to him. There is a moment of meeting and transformation when he is "just like drunk" or in vocabulary more familiar to us, "stoned", or in a dream-like state. In this experience he can understand the animal's speech, and the animal speaks to him. It may seem to him that he stays with the animal for days or even weeks. The animal usually tells him when to leave, and when he starts to re-enter everyday reality he lurks in the bush outside the people's camp, afraid of the smell of smoke and unable to understand human speech.

Eventually the people spot him, bring him in and give him food and water. An older man puts his medicine coat around him and he sleeps. When he wakes he has returned to the world of men. He can talk to them again but cannot reveal anything, because he has not fully understood what happened in the bush.

What actually happens in the bush? I believe that children do live with animals and learn to speak their language. If ethologists can do this, surely Indians whose way of life brings them onto intimate terms with animals can attain the same rapport. So much for the physical events that may happen. A more complex question is, What does it mean? I can only begin to answer that question just as a Beaver child newly returned from the experience can only begin to learn the answers over the rest of his life. However it is clear that the experience goes far deeper than learning the habits of animals and attaining a rapport useful for hunting in later life. Although it is all these things, it is also and more fundamentally the beginning of a path of seeking to understand his own humanity. They do not find animals in themselves, but rather begin to find themselves in the natures of animals. Each species has its unique and distinctive nature, and people can see in themselves qualities that are most like the qualities of a particular animal species. Animals, besides being themselves, are symbols for men of the varieties of human nature and a man can learn his combination of qualities through getting close to the qualities of animals. The experience with a medicine animal in the bush is the culmination of childhood and the beginning of adulthood. Children do not find their medicines then but they do find the path that will lead them to this discovery later on. It is a path of dreaming and singing.

Children no longer seek to live with animals after puberty. For girls puberty is marked by an important ceremony on her first menstruation, and for boys the first kill of every major species of game is the occasion for a giveaway and dance. Their vision quest experiences are not exactly forgotten but are pushed to the background of an exciting busy adolescence. When a boy-man becomes one of the core adults of a band and has his own children (sometimes not until he is around thirty since he is likely to marry an older widow first), the experience of his pre-

adolescent vision quest and post-adolescent maturity come together in a powerful symbolic synthesis. He dreams. Of course he has always dreamed and known that dreams are crystalizations of reality, but these first dreams of maturity are special because they show him his medicines with the clarity of wisdom that adds a new direction to the innocence of childhood and to the illumination of the vision itself. This clarity and wisdom can only come when he has entered responsibly into the lives of others and learned to see himself in them. He has always in a sense known his medicines, but now he knows what they mean. The path his life has taken from the moment of his birth has come full circle, and he is ready to begin other paths to the completion of other circles. In the dreams he sees himself as a child living in the bush and knows that the stories he has both taken for granted, and taken literally, are about *him*. When he entered the world of animals as a child he also entered into the stories. The animals he knows and *is*, are the animals of the creation.

The knowledge that comes through dreaming is absolute because it comes from a level of symbolic association that is deeper than consciousness. Throughout Beaver life, this link through dreaming to a level of absolute certainty is given the importance it deserves. Dreams reveal the often hidden significance of events, and the immediacy of their imagery is accepted as an important gift. In this respect dreams for the Beavers are linked with songs since songs are experiences that convey the imagery of a dream into the conscious realm and allow this kind of experience to be communicated. Both songs and dreams are paths that take one into the realm where symbol and experience merge. The most important dreams a Beaver can have are those in which he follows a song, for the thread of a Beaver's song is the path his mind can take into the deepest realms of his subjectivity and out to reach the subjectivities of others. It is frustrating to have to use words to describe what must essentially be heard and experienced, but the reader must use his imagination and perhaps some experience with Indian music to see how songs become the medium of this inner journey. As you follow the turns of the song and learn them you are learning the inner paths of the mind. The Beavers translate *songs* into English as prayer because they reach simultaneously inward and outward.

The Beaver word for medicine is *mayine*, his or its song, and the central symbol of a man's medicine dream is a song given to him by his medicine animal. The songs are those sung by the giant animals when they hunted men, and the medicine dream reveals that the childhood experience with the animals was also the mind's journey into its song. The dreams also reveal to a man how to assemble a medicine bundle of objects symbolizing the powers of the mythic animals and instruct him to avoid certain foods or situations. By these signs other men know that he "knows something."

A man's medicine bundle hanging above where he sleeps toward the rising sun is a focus for his dreaming, a point at which the paths of thought and song begin and end. Through dreams he can receive and assimilate the flow of events into a significant order. Let me try to explain my understanding of what is, after all, the innermost subjectivity of people in a culture very different from mine. Hunters nearly always say that a successful hunt has been preceded by a dream. Elsewhere I interpreted this as an *ex post facto* claim for having caused the outcome.⁴ Now I believe it would be more in line with what I know of their dreaming to say the dream grasps the essence of a particular moment rather than causing it in our objective sense of cause and effect. Perhaps it would be better to say that the dream brings an event into being from the multitudinous events of possibility. There are many more possible occurrences than can actually be realized and in hunting, as in gambling, one seeks to know the dimensions of possibility and to know something of the odds with regard to various classes of possible events. There are many animals in the bush, and any one could be willing to give himself to the people. When man and animal do meet it is a moment of transformation, like the moment of meeting in the vision quest when the child enters the animal's world of experience and is devoured by another realm of consciousness. In hunting, the animal enters the man's experience and his meat is eaten by the people. Through their meeting the man can be instrumental in bringing into actuality a transformation that existed before only as a possibility, just as through the meeting of child and animal in the vision quest the child is given a path to the realization of his humanity. The vision quest symbolically transforms the child's meat into spirit,

and the hunt transforms the animal's spirit into meat. But the moment of killing is also a moment of creation for it brings potential into actuality, the manifesting into the manifested. The hunter's dreams come from the sunrise, the place where the new day is created, and come to him through his medicine bundle, the symbols of his entry into the world of animals and myth.

The Beavers symbolize the creative mystery of this transformation by saying that the shadows of animals killed in hunting return to the sky to be born again in the meat of another body. This completes and begins the circle of creation, for the animal's spirit continues its journeys through the peoples' respectful acceptance of its meat. That is why the Beavers place such a great emphasis on proper care of meat and respect to the remains left at the kill site. The hunter's dream is as much of a shadow waiting to be born as it is of an animal preparing to die. The dream does not cause the meeting between man and animal, but it puts them into the proper sense of understanding that can make the meeting possible and meaningful. The dream emanates from an unconscious repository of the man's whole lifetime of experience and reaches out to touch a possible moment of creation. At every stage of his life his culture has provided symbols that help him organize and understand his experience, and these symbols are almost literally compacted and bundled together in a little pouch that hangs above his head as he sleeps in anticipation of the sun's return to the earth and an animal's return to the sky. The songs of his medicine are always in his inner ear for they tell him what it is to be a man.

I have only once heard a Beaver medicine song, *ma yine* ("his-its" song), for they stem from the deepest reaches of a person's subjectivity. They are the songs of the medicine animals within the man, and they well up and reach out only when he, or one close to him, is in some way close to death, either in a fight or grave illness or great need to succeed in hunting. The only time I heard them was when an old man was preparing to die. But although the medicine songs are seldom sung in public, they are always in a person's mind and in his dreams.

Ma yine medicine songs carry a person's mind up and down the abysses of his subjectivity, but there are other gentler songs

that reach out horizontally to touch the subjectivities of others through a sharing of common experience. These are the songs a man sings in his camp when he is not out hunting and the songs that bring people together to dance. They are called *ahata yine*, God songs or *nachene yine*, dreamers songs, because they are brought back from heaven by a man who has died, a dreamer or shaman. The dreamer (*naachi*) can bridge the gap between subjectivities, because he has followed the vertical dimension of mind to its polar extremities and discovered that they form a circle into another dimension that links his mind to those of The People. He follows the inner path, led on by a song he hears in his dreams to the point of death, the ultimate in subjective isolation but also the point of transformation, to find that beyond is a realm where all subjectivities merge into one. This is heaven (*yage*) from which six dreamers, six grandfathers (actual men who are remembered by their descendents), have sent down a *nachene yine* whose turns are the path of heaven. If he can follow the song's path, "grab hold of it with his mind", in what we would call a state of trance or deep meditation, and they call dreaming, he will become the seventh of the grandfathers and return to the ordinary world as a dreamer carrying a new song for the people. The dreamer is actually seven men and his earthly person becomes the seventh shaman. Dreamers are the only men who sleep toward the sunset. The ultimate source of dreamers' songs is in the animal world for they are the prayers that animals sing when they have hard times. The dreamers in heaven have heard the animals dancing and singing and sent the songs down into the dreams of the seventh shaman, who then gives them to the people. Every song that the Beavers sing is both an animal's song and the song of a particular dreamer. The songs bring people together to dance in prayer, and every man knows that when he dies he will follow the path of a dreamer's song to heaven.

There is much more I could say about the penetration of dreaming and singing into every aspect of Beaver life, but in the short space remaining I would like to leave you with a picture of a Beaver ceremonial, shown in figure 2. The Beavers dance, usually in a large tipi, clockwise or as they say, "following the sun" around a fire. The fire is the centre of the circle and its

column of smoke joins heaven and earth, the axis of subjective experience. Extending horizontally out from the fire is a circle of people. The singers and drummers are mainly young adults, the hunters. They sit in the direction of the sunrise, just as they sleep in their own camps toward the sunrise. Older men sit toward

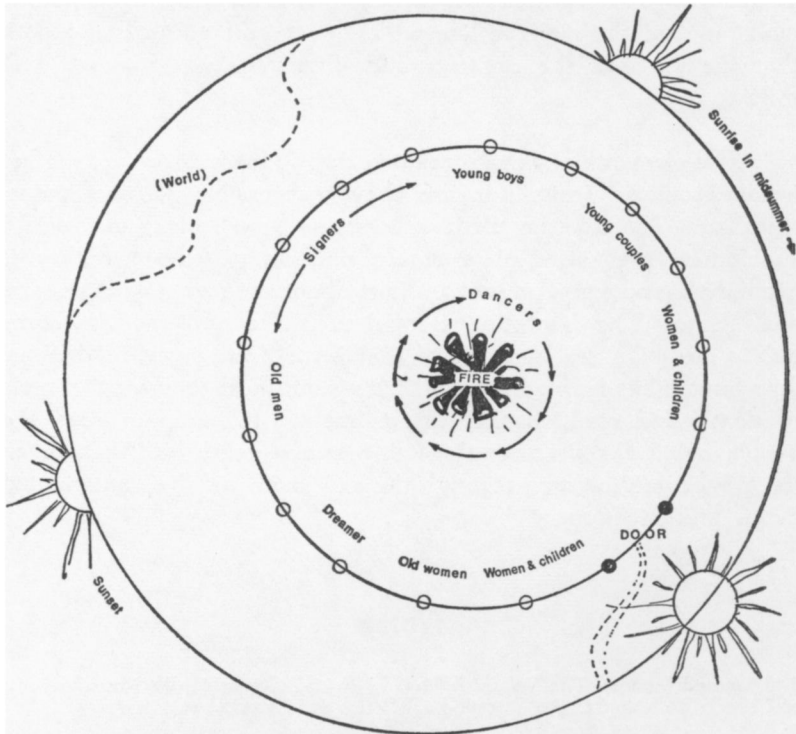


Figure 2 Dance Lodge

the north, and the very old, as well as the dreamer if he is present, sit toward the sunset. Women and their children sit along the southern circumference of the circle and the door is generally the dividing line between men and women. The singing and dancing goes on for three or four nights, and during the day the dreamer may dream for the people or talk to them about his dreaming. A comparison of figures 1 and 2 will reveal that the

dance lodge is a ceremonial extension of the domestic camp whose metaphor is extended to include all the people who have come together to dance. The singers sit to the east and sing, but instead of medicine bundles that bring medicine songs to their minds, they have drums that carry heaven songs out to the people. The dance is a hopping shuffle around the fire. They say it is walking to heaven. The rhythm is a steady, powerful beat, evocative of walking, and the melodic line with its intricate turns is the path that the animals, the dreamer and ultimately you yourself will follow.

The elements of Sekani religion that Jenness describes are not isolated culture traits nor are they inaccessible to our understanding. Among the Beaver, personal medicines and public shamanism are parts of a single philosophy whose reality is grounded in common understandings about the meaning of dreams and songs. The hunter's personal medicine and the dreamer's public medicine are both songs that have been given in dreams. The hunter has learned through his vision quest to enter the cycle of death and creation that brings meat into camp to feed the people, while the dreamer through his own death has been given the gift of guiding men through the experience of their anticipated death and creation.

Notes

1. Diamond Jenness, *The Sekani Indians of British Columbia*, National Museum of Canada Bulletin 84. Anthropological Series no. 20 (Ottawa, 1937).
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 67-68.
3. Robin and Antonia Ridington, "The Inner Eye of Shamanism and Totemism," *History of Religions*, in press.
4. Robin Ridington, "The Medicine Fight: an Instrument of Political Process Among the Beaver Indians," *American Anthropologist* 70:1152-1160 (December 1968).