

THE TIMELESS PRESENT IN THE MYTHOLOGY
OF THE AIVILIK ESKIMOS

by

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Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future
And time future contained in time past.

T.S. Eliot

The beginning of the Aivilik world is, strictly, at a point out of time. Aivilik cosmogony contains no doctrine of creation ex nihilo, no philosophical conception of creation from nothingness. No supreme power ever acted as creator, maker or artificer. Nothing came first and of itself. For there had already been forms of existence which looked upon the transformer in admiration and amaze. Nor is mention made of a mythological age when all animals lived a human life. With the exception of stories of metamorphosis, which involve neither "change" nor "origin" in our sense of these words, no attempt is made to account for the beginning of anything.

Aivilik mythology simply ignores the question of creation. The world never came into existence; it has always been, exactly as now. Before the coming of Christianity, when the goddess still lived beneath the sea in the person of a woman with tangled hair and mutilated hands, spirit beings were perhaps more active than now. But they are the same ones who inhabit the world of today, and it is inconceivable that they will ever change or disappear.

It follows that the Aivilik experience no desire to set a beginning to the chain of events to which they belong. Indeed, they see no chain! If we, as outsiders, regard this attitude as editorial indifference or outright error, we miss the whole point. For Aivilik mythmakers reject the question of creation and beginning. They regard the "past" as merely an attribute of the present, as something immanent in all

Aivilik being. Instead of describing attributes, they give an account of mythical and historical past by presenting essence.

History and mythical reality, then, are not the "past" to the Aivilik. They are forever present, participating in all current being, giving meaning to all their activities and to all existence. The Aivilik will speak of a whale which their fathers hunted, or the one which the mythical Oomanetook killed, in exactly the same terms with which they will refer to a whale which they themselves are hunting now; and it will give them satisfaction to do so.

In all their undertakings this "past" is present, giving them validity and value. Wherever they go, their surroundings have meaning for them; every ruin, rock and cleft is imbued with mythical significance. For example, there lie scattered along the southern shore a number of tiny tent rings which the Aivilik declare to be the work of the Tunik, strangers from the past whose spirits still linger somewhere in the ruins. Of the stories that are told of these mythical folk perhaps none is quite so fascinating as that which accounts for their swiftness in the chase and the smallness of their homes. For it is related that they slept with their legs propped against the tent walls and their feet overhead so the blood flowed from their legs and thereby promoted their speed as hunters. Other stories tell how these people, a physically superior race, were driven from this land by the more dexterous Eskimo. Yet the Tunik do not in any sense belong to the past, to an earlier age, to the dead -- and -- bygone world. They remain forever in the present, inhabiting the ruins, giving these stones a special quality, bestowing on them an aura of spiritual timelessness. For in these myths it is, always is, however much they say it was. The tales bestride the tenses and make the has-been and the to-be present in the popular sense. In them life and death meet, for they conjure up timelessness and invoke the past that it may be relived in the present.

This is true even of legends surrounding the Sadlermiut Eskimos, a remarkable group wiped out by epidemic in 1902-3. Some of the older Aivilik visited this community before it was destroyed and even adopted two Sadlermiut children, one of whom lived until recently. Added to this direct knowledge

is a vast store of legend concerning these people and their ancient homes. There is, for example, a tale which accounts for the presence of a great boulder on the top of a steep hill at Native Point. Tradition has it that it was deposited there by Avalak, famed Sadlermiut hunter. I have no idea whether or not Avalak actually did transport this great rock -- a feat which would require extraordinary strength -- but the Aivilik assert that he did (pointing to the rock as proof,) and this belief somehow changes the quality of the stone.

Material objects are not alone in possessing the "past" as an attribute. Certain old songs and secret prayers, for example, are thought to have once belonged to spirit beings and to have been passed down through a number of generations until finally inherited by their present owners. The personal history of each is often known, and its owner gets satisfaction out of recounting incidents in the past where it was successfully employed to combat sickness or thwart disaster. Chronology and historical sequence are quite irrelevant here; the history of each song or prayer is important not as development but as an ingredient of being.

Indeed, the Aivilik have no word for history. When they want to distinguish between different kinds of occasions, they will say, for example, eetchuk, that is, "time before known time," not a previous phase of this time, but a different kind of time. More frequently they will use the term "in the time of my grandfather's father," which does not refer to an earlier phase of this time, and definitely not to the actual generation of their great-grandfathers. Rather it is comparable to the phrase tamnagok, "once upon a time," with its double sense of past and future and its true meaning of everlasting now.

History, for the Aivilik, is not a confused repository of anecdote; they are merely uninterested in chronological sequence. For example, I recorded Ohnainewk's autobiography which was given with complete disregard to chronology. He was apparently uninterested in narrating his story from the ground upward, for he began with the crisis, so to speak, and worked backward and forward, with many omissions and repetitions, on the tacit assumption that my mind moved in the same groove as his and that explanations were needless. It produced the most extraordinary effect, one reminiscent

of that achieved by Joyce and other sophisticated writers who deliberately reject sequential time. I was later forced to rearrange clusters of statements so that they represented an historical sequence -- only then did they become coherent to me.

Chronological sequence is of no importance to the Aivilik. They are interested in the event itself, not in its place within a related series of events. Neither antecedents nor consequences are sought, for they are largely unconcerned with the causal or telic relationship between events or acts. In their mythology, concepts of spirit beings are particularistic, not organized into groups or hierarchies. They have a capacity for recounting brief, minutely-detailed legends, but they show little interest in organizing such accounts into wholes with a significant meaning. The details are of interest for their own sake, rather than as part of some larger pattern. When we inspect this mythology we find no emphasis upon past, present, or future, but a unity embracing complexity. Everything is in mythology, and everything in mythology is, and is together.

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