

THIS WORLD WE KNOW



Man: A Course of Study

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THIS WORLD WE KNOW

We know that our land is not the whole world, because the world has no boundaries...and the world has not changed since long ago when our people started to remember.

Beliefs and Traditions of the Netsilik Eskimos

Collected by **KNUD RASMUSSEN**



All the things in the sky — the sun, the moon and the stars, and thunder and lightning — are people who once lived on earth.

STORIES OF BEGINNING TIMES

How the world began and where the first people came from — these are hard things to understand and difficult things to talk about.

We believe in our tales, for everything in them did happen once, in a time so far back that there was no time at all. Our tales tell our history and our religion. In them it is said that it is so, and therefore it is so.

In the earliest times on earth, there were no animals in the sea. People did not need blubber for their fires, because newly drifted snow would burn. Great forests grew on the bottom of the sea. From them come the pieces of driftwood that still wash up on our shores. In those days, there was no ice on the sea. This is a distant memory of the time when the first people lived on the earth.

Everything was in darkness then. The lands and the animals could not be seen. Both men and animals lived on earth, but there was no difference between them. Men could become animals and animals could become men, and they all spoke the same language.

In the very earliest times, men were not as good as hunters are today, and their weapons were few. So they had little food, and sometimes they had to eat the earth itself. Everything came from the ground, and people lived on the ground.

They did not have all the rules to follow that we do today. There were no dangers to threaten them, but there were no pleasures either.

That was the time when magic words were made. Suddenly a word would become powerful and could make things happen, and no one could explain why. It was always dark until once a hare and a fox had a talk.

"Darkness, darkness," said the fox. He wanted to steal from caches in the darkness.

"Day, day," said the hare. He wanted the light of day so he could find a place to feed.

And suddenly day came, for the hare's words were more powerful than the fox's. Day came, and was replaced by night, and when night had gone, day came again.

In those early times there were only men and no women. There is an old story that tells how women came from men. One time the world collapsed and was destroyed, and great showers of rain flooded the land. All the animals died, and the world was empty. Then two men grew up out of the earth. They married, for there was no one else, and one man sang a song to become a woman. After a while they had a child, and they were the first family.

In those early ages, women often could not have children so the earth had to help. Women went out searching for children who had grown up out of the earth. A long search was needed to find boys, but there was no need to go far to find girls. This is the way the earth gave children to the first people, and in that way they became many.

All the things in the sky, the sun, the moon and the stars, and thunder and lightning, are people who once lived on earth but have gone up into the sky. Why did they go? Well, we know that evil actions have populated the air and the sky with spirits. But this does not mean that all the ones in the sky are evil. There are others who found life on earth too difficult. Thunder and lightning once were children with no parents. When the people they lived with were hunting caribou, they left the orphans to die of hunger. No one cared for them, so they went up into the sky and frightened to death the people who had wanted them to starve.

We do not worship the sun, even though our land is cold. There is no need to worship what is good. The sun is there and we are glad. The moon, on the other hand, is big and bad-tempered. It is dangerous because of its temper. It may bring bad luck in hunting. Or it may take a man from earth before he has to die. People fear the moon, so it is a power.

There are other things up in the sky that we do not understand, like the rainbow. It is so far away that no one is afraid of its colors in the sky. Perhaps it is a doorway to something we do not know, but since we do not know, we do not offer it gifts. We do not concern ourselves with solving all riddles. We are content sometimes not to understand.

Here we know only our own land. Before we lived here it was the home of great and strong people called the Tunrit. We live here because they came here first and learned how to hunt the animals. They lived in stone houses and were mighty hunters on the sea. They were strong and they loved their land. But they were driven away and now it is our land.

We know that our land is not the whole earth, because the earth has no boundaries. A man who wants to travel far can go on and on forever. The earth has not changed since the time long ago when our people started to remember.

SOULS AND SPIRITS

Every person is made up of a soul, a name and a body. The body is only a case for the soul while man is alive on earth.

It is the soul that gives man life. We know that souls do not die, because often our dead friends or relatives come to visit us in our dreams. Then we see that they are the same as when they were here on earth.

The soul lives in a man's body as long as he breathes. If he becomes sick, it is because his soul has been harmed. When he dies, his soul leaves his body, but for a time it stays nearby and people treat it with great respect. This gives the soul a time of peace before it goes to live in the land of the dead.

It is the soul that makes a man a man, but it is his name that makes him an individual among other men. The special power attached to the name belongs to every person who owns that name. People are always named for someone else, and this makes a long line of invisible protectors to keep danger away from the person with the same name. They are his guardian spirits.

Animals have souls just as men do. The soul of a man is a human, and the soul of a seal is a little seal. It is the soul that gives a creature the characteristics that make it one of its own kind. All living things have their own souls.



All powers and forces in life come from souls. When a man dies, his soul leaves his body and becomes a spirit.

We know that all good powers and all evil forces in life come from souls. What makes life so difficult for us is not just that our own souls are open to danger, but that all our food can only be gotten by taking the body away from an animal's soul.

To be a good hunter, a man must be skillful and energetic, and he must go out in all sorts of weather to hunt. But besides skill, he must be on good terms with the souls of the animals he hunts.

Like a man, a seal has a soul that cannot die. When its body dies, the soul goes to live in the body of a newborn seal. A hunter can catch a seal over and over again if he is kind to the soul and makes it want to be caught by him.

In caribou hunting, too, a man must be on very good terms with the souls of the caribou. Otherwise he will not be able to get the large number of skins his family needs to survive the cold winter. The souls of caribou are especially dangerous if the ancient rules are not followed exactly.

Often people are thoughtless and do not treat souls with respect. When this happens, the soul is turned into an evil spirit, a tonrak. It does not go to the land of the dead. It stays on earth where men live and persecutes those who harmed it. Only great angatoks can destroy tonraks — and then not often.

We believe that air and sea and earth are full of spirits. They are the souls of dead people or animals, souls that have turned into tonraks because of rules that men have broken.

There is a story that tells about how a soul becomes a tonrak:

An old woman named Kubliusak had been sick for a long time. When she died, her family did not follow the death taboo. They did not wait until the proper number of days had gone by before they moved to a new camp.

After a time, two women went back to the old camp. There they found old Kubliusak sitting in her igloo furiously turning into an evil spirit. Terrified, the two women ran from the igloo! Kubliusak followed so close behind that she tore one woman's parka.

The other people went back to see Kubliusak. Looking in the window, they could see her turning ugly and fearsome. She was sitting at her lamp boiling blood and stirring it with her bare finger that never got burned. The people were stricken with fear, and regretted that they had not observed the death taboo.

Among them lived a great angatok who had been successful in overcoming ghosts. He tied the harpoons of all the men together so that he could reach Kubliusak through the window. Then he uttered some special magic words and struck her down without going into the house.

If she had not been destroyed in time she would have done her old neighbors great harm.

A great angatok described evil spirits this way: They are invisible beings, things we cannot see, who sometimes murder and kill; it is terrible and almost intolerable!

Evil spirits are greatly feared. Sometimes men are afraid to sleep alone when they are hunting, even in the light nights of summer. As autumn comes and the nights are dark and stormy, men hardly dare to leave their tents at all. Sometimes a spirit does its evil deed by carrying someone off, but more often it gives a strange sickness to someone it wants to harm.

All spirits are not evil, so all spirits are not equally feared. Spirits can bring sickness, or they can bring health. They can do great harm, or they can help mankind in his struggle for daily food.



To avoid suffering for ourselves and for others, we must follow the rules that please the spirits.

THE ANCIENT RULES OF LIFE

From birth to death our lives are controlled by powers beyond ourselves. These are powerful spirits who can make us suffer — not only the person who offends them but all of us. To avoid suffering for ourselves and for others we must follow the rules that please the spirits.

These rules are many and they are often a burden to us. They are most important at times when special help is needed — at the time of birth and when a child is young, during sickness and at death. They are also important in hunting, where survival for all is at stake.

At the time a child is born, the time when he receives his soul, we follow these ancient rules and many others.

A woman must never give birth to a baby in the igloo or tent where her family is living. A small igloo or tent is built especially for her. There she must stay alone with her baby for a month or more. This is because newborn babies are very open to danger from evil spirits. The spirits might attack others in the family if everyone lived close together.

No clothing can be made for a child before it is born, or before it is certain that it will live. Soon after it is born, the naked baby is put into the back of its mother's parka, and then she can begin to make a suit of clothes.

As soon as the new mother leaves her special place, the family must move on, for the settlement where a baby is born becomes unlucky. If the hunting is bad and the family must move before the time is up, the mother and child must go out through a hole in the wall of their place, not through the entrance. And on the journey the new mother cannot walk alone with her child. She should have someone else with her, for tonraks are quick to harm newborn babies.

The rules that we follow when someone dies are most important of all. They must never be broken, or the soul of the dead person will become a restless spirit who will do evil to mankind forever.

When a person dies, all those around must cry out in woe. We believe that the soul of a dead man stays by the body for four days, and that of a dead woman for five days. During these days the body is left inside. The family must stay with the body and do no work at all, not even prepare meals.

When the time is over, the family takes the body out through a hole in the wall and puts it on the ground with a stone at head and foot. That is all. When the soul is gone, the body is no longer important.

Special things must be done to make the souls of the animals we hunt feel kindly toward us. These, too, are rules that have come down to us from long ago.

We must follow strict rules when we hunt seals. But these rules are important only in the dark time of the year, not in the spring when the sun is high. For all things, the dark time is most dangerous.

Once we have moved to the sea ice, no work can be done on caribou skins through the dark time of the winter. The seals would be offended and would go away if the skins of other animals were worked on then. Only when spring comes and the sun is high in the sky, may caribou skins again be sewn.

A good wife always hangs the jawbones of the seals her husband catches on the drying rack over the lamp. This brings the man good hunting because the seals are pleased to know that they are shown such respect.

Before a seal is brought into an igloo, a floor of fresh snow must be put down. Then the careful hunter always dips a piece of snow into water and lets the water drip into the seal's mouth. We know that seals are thirsty, and often they let themselves be caught just to get a drink of water. Seals know where the souls of animals are treated well, and they find their way back to such people.

It is a great time when a boy catches his first seal. Only his mother can cut up the animal, and this must never be done out of doors. The father and mother of the young hunter quickly eat some of the meat, and they offer it to all the people at the camp. This way the soul of the seal feels welcome among men and will soon let itself be caught again.

So that the seals will always know where to find people, we leave a sign for them before we leave a camp. The skulls of all the seals caught there are laid out so that they face the direction of the new camp.

The souls of the caribou are especially sensitive, and great care must be taken to treat them well.

During the caribou hunting time, the skins can be dried but not softened or sewn. To scrape the skin at that time would hurt the soul of the animal. If a man needs a new coat before the time for sewing has come, snow is collected from drifts to make a tiny igloo for the seamstress. There she can sew, but she must not use a sharp scraper to soften the skins.

Caribou meat must not be cooked over a fire of driftwood or animal bones, and grass must never be used to make the fire. Grass is what a caribou lives on, and using it to cook the meat would shock the soul of the animal.

Fish is an important food at times of the year when there is no other food to live on. The fish caught and stored at the summer places often make the difference between life and death in the winter. Thus good fishing rivers are like sacred places. At these places no work can be done in the tents; it is done only at special places some distance from the water.

To be sure of a good catch, we always follow one ancient rule. When the fish are brought to the shore, we rub ashes on their eyes so that they cannot see their brothers approaching and warn them away from the fishing place.

In all the ancient rules for hunting one thing is the same: We must respect the souls of the animals and show them how happy we are to have used their bodies. Only if we are grateful for the catch will the animals return to us.



*We must follow the ancient rules that are the will of
Nuliajuk, Narsuk and Tatkek see that her will is obeyed.*

GREAT SPIRITS

There are many kinds of spirits, but there are only three great spirits: Nuliajuk, Narsuk and Tatkek. These are the powers that rule the earth and all the animals and the lives of men on earth.

The most powerful of the great spirits is Nuliajuk, the mother of animals and the mistress of the sea and land. She is powerful because all the food of mankind is in her command. She can make animals visible and easy to hunt, so we have food and clothing and warmth. Or she can make the animals disappear, so we go hungry and cold. Thus she is the greatest menace to men, or their greatest helper.

We must follow all the ancient rules that are the will of Nuliajuk. Narsuk and Tatkek see that her will is obeyed. Tatkek watches for broken rules and punishes the offender for neglect. And Narsuk carries out the will of Nuliajuk by bringing the storms that are the cruelest punishment of all.

How Nuliajuk came to be is an old, old story.

Once, long ago, people left a settlement on a raft of kayaks tied together. There were many people, and there was little room on the raft.

A little orphan girl named Nuliajuk jumped on the raft with other boys and girls. But there was no one to care about her, and the raft was crowded, so the people threw Nuliajuk in the water. She tried with all her might to cling

to the edge of the raft, but the people cut off her fingers so she could not hold on.

She sank to the bottom of the sea, and as she sank the cut-off pieces of her fingers became seals. There in the sea, she became a spirit, the sea spirit, the mother of the sea beasts. And she also became the mistress of everything else alive, the land beasts too, every animal that man hunts.

That way she came to have great power over man. She is the most feared of all the spirits, the most powerful, and the one who controls the destinies of man. For this reason almost all the ancient rules are to make her happy. This is especially true for the dark time when the sun is low and it is cold and windy, for then life is most dangerous to live.

Nuliajuk lives alone in a house at the bottom of the sea. She is quick in her anger and terrible in her might when she wants to punish men. She knows everything and so she hides the animals from people who have broken even the smallest rule. Then angatoks must call on their helping spirits to urge her to be kind again.

That is all we know of Nuliajuk the sea spirit. She is the spirit who gives seals to mankind. But because men had no pity on her when she lived on earth, she would like to have them perish.

Narsuk is the dangerous spirit of the air. He lives somewhere out in the universe, and from there he threatens mankind with the mighty powers of nature — wind and sea, fog, rain and snow.

Narsuk was the child of a giant and his wife, both of whom were murdered. The murderers left the child near the bodies of his dead parents. This evil act turned the child into a spirit that flew up into the sky and became the spirit of the weather. It is dressed in ragged child's clothing, a suit all in one piece made of caribou fur. When Narsuk shakes his body, air rushes out from all the holes in his clothing and the winds begin to blow.

When the spirit of the winds keeps blowing, there is no peace for men. Then an angatok must go to Narsuk and fight with him until he is calm.

Tatkek is a great power, but he is not feared. He is a good spirit that helps us rather than does us harm. He is the protector of those who die in accidents. People in danger hear him calling out: "Come! Come to me. It does not hurt to die."

Tatkek wants to protect us from Nuliajuk's anger. He sees that we do not break any taboos. He sets the sea in motion and brings seals to us, so he is the one who gives us good hunting. Because he does not want to see us suffer, he hastens to us to warn us and to punish in his own way those who have done wrong, because he is helpless to save us when mighty Nuliajuk has taken all the animals.

Life on earth is a constant struggle between good and evil. We fear the spirits, because we fear hunger and sickness.



*An angatok sings the special songs that make his spirit
come to him.*

ANGATOKS, MAGIC WORDS AND AMULETS

We would be crushed by the mighty power of the spirits of the earth and the sea if we did not have our angatoks to help us.

Angatoks are people who have the power to control certain spirits. It is through their personal spirits that angatoks can talk with the spirits they control. Angatoks can see things far away. They see through darkness and look into the future. They know the secrets of others. This is how they help us when we are sick, unlucky in hunting, or in danger from enemies.

Men, and sometimes women, become angatoks by going off with an old angatok who will teach them. There they are taught the ways of angatoks and feel the strange light in their bodies that lets them know that they are in contact with the spirits. The angatok does everything in his power to surround this event with mystery.

Other people become angatoks without planning to. They do not choose their helping spirits. The spirits come to them, usually in their dreams. People who think about things that are hidden to others sometimes can use their private dreams and visions to help others. In this way, they become angatoks.

An angatok consults with his spirits in two ways, and when he does this, he uses a special language. Sometimes he holds a meeting of the entire camp. There he sings the special songs that make his spirit come to him. When the

spirit arrives and enters his body, it speaks through his voice. We know that it is not the angatok's voice, because it sounds like the voice of the helping spirit he has called.

Other times an angatok consults with his helping spirits by tying a line to the leg or the head of another person. He pulls on the line, asking over and over where his spirits are. When the leg or head becomes so heavy that he cannot lift it, he knows that the spirit has arrived and is ready to answer questions. It may be that the person who is in danger has broken one of the ancient rules; the angatok must discover which one. He asks the spirit many questions until again the limb becomes too heavy to lift. Then he knows he has asked the right question and has received his answer.

Often this is all that is needed. A person who is ill will be cured, or the hunting will get better, just by discovering the cause of the danger. When the cause of the danger is known, the danger is over.

Angatoks are the people who are best able to contact the spirits. But even they have their limits, and there are ways that we ordinary people can ask the spirits to help us. We can have magic words, or we can wear amulets on our clothing.

We speak magic words to the spirits, the souls of dead people or animals, who can help a sickness, stop a snow-storm or bring animals to us. Or we can use magic against an enemy. Because magic can be done without the help of others, evil magic can be secret. A man can be planning great harm to another, though the men seem to be friends.

This is why we are often suspicious of the simplest actions of our neighbors.

Magic words must be used with care. Their power is great, and they do not always do what they are asked. They can turn against the person who spoke them and do the harm to him that was intended for someone else.

An amulet is an object — an owl's claw, a swan's bill, or a bear's tooth — that symbolizes the spirit of the animal it came from. The spirit of the animal helps the person who wears the amulet by giving him special powers to overcome danger.

Nowadays, we must have many amulets to protect us, as many as possible, because each one is not powerful enough in itself. Long ago people could change themselves into the form of their amulets without even being angatoks. Now only the very cleverest angatoks can turn themselves into the form of their helping spirits.

We no longer have great angatoks among us. We know from the old stories that once they were much more powerful than they are today. But we do not speak against our angatoks, for they still have the power to harm us if they choose.

In the old stories marvelous things happen. Great wonders were performed often, and magic and amulets were strong. These days, people are only people. They are no longer masters of their fate, the way people were long ago.

All things were more powerful in times gone by.



Leo + Diane Dillon

We do not believe, we fear.

THIS WORLD WE KNOW

We do not believe, we fear, for the world is a dangerous place. We fear the spirits, great and small. We fear the weather and sickness and suffering. We fear hunger in the snow.

What do we desire most from life?

We wish to have the food we need, enough animals and enough clothes to shield us from the wind and the cold. If only we could always live without sadness and without pain, without suffering and without sickness. . . . These things that we want for ourselves we also want for those who are close to us.

And what do we do so our fears will not come true?

We try not to offend the great spirits or the souls of animals. We follow the ancient rules of life. We make our souls as strong as we can, and then seek more strength from the power in our names. We gain special abilities through amulets, and we find magic words or songs to help us.

And if we cannot manage in our own way, we seek help from our angatoks, whose work it is to protect mankind from the hidden dangers of life.