

Powers Which We Do Not Know: The Gods and Spirits of the Inuit. Daniel Merkur. Moscow, Idaho: University of Idaho Press, 1991, x + 280 pages, \$22.95 paper.

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Because the traditional Inuit way of life was a successful adaptation to the harshest environment in which humans reside, their religion is of considerable importance in understanding the potentialities of culture and is often cited in general studies of comparative religion. Yet prior to the work of Daniel Merkur, there have been no monograph-length studies of Inuit religion, and journal articles have been few and far between. In part, this is due to the immense difficulty of the task. The considerable ethnographic material is of varying, often poor quality with regard to Inuit religion, and there are virtually no recordings of relevant material in the various dialects of the Inuit language.

Merkur has demonstrated considerable fortitude and brilliance in mastering the voluminous pertinent ethnography and in producing two solid volumes on central aspects of Inuit religion. *Powers Which We Do Not Know* complements his earlier study, *Becoming Half Hidden: Shamanism and Initiation Among the Inuit* (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell, 1985). The latter volume, perhaps the most important on shamanism in general, was written from history of religions and psychoanalytic perspectives and concerns the major aspect of Inuit religious behavior. The volume under discussion supplements the earlier published study by focusing on the ideological basis of Inuit religion, combining history of religion methodologies with folkloristics. Together they form a solid introduction to the religion of a culture that is to be found in a large part of the extreme north of our planet and all of the inhabited tundra, from northeastern Siberia to Greenland.

Merkur begins by introducing in the first chapter, "Souls, Spirits, and Indwellers in Nature," the terms that are fundamental to his discussion, clarifying basic concepts that are frequently confused and never before precisely delineated. The introduction of the latter concept, "Indwellers," is particularly important because it avoids the commonly found Eurocentric imposition of "Owners" or "Masters" of animals on an egalitarian culture lacking our concepts of private property. He continues this discussion in the next two chapters—"The Breath-Soul and the Indweller in the Wind" and "Idealism and Shamanic Trances"—elucidating the meaning of "indweller" in discussing a major numinous figure, *Sila* or Wind.

The following two chapters—"The Earth Indweller" and "The Mother of Caribou and Walrus"—enters the current controversy over the indigenous nature of

"Mother Earth" and demonstrates that the concept of the Earth as a maternal and nurturing numinous spirit is of great antiquity in Inuit religion. This is followed by "The Rise of Sea Mother," the longest chapter in the book. Here Merkur demonstrates how, when and where the Sea Mother displaced the Earth Mother and further argues that in particular Inuit subcultures, she took on monistic qualities. The subsequent chapter, "Reincarnation and the Moon Man," introduces the complex counterpart to the Sea Mother. The final chapters—"Eagle, the Hunter's Helper," "The Raven Father," "*Tornarssuk*, the Polar Bear Spirit," "The Moon Dog," and "The One with an *Amaut*"—are shorter and discuss a variety of spirits and their functions.

Merkur follows a similar approach in each chapter, save the introductory one. He presents each spirit as she or he is mentioned in the ethnographic literature for each Inuit subculture, often pointing out the weaknesses and difficulties of the available material, followed by a "synthesis" of the varying descriptions. Merkur counters the inherent problems of the extant literature by covering all of it and particularly pointing to where literatures coincide. The general descriptions and analyses are followed by summaries of the spirits in recorded myths and their relationship with Inuit religious practices, particularly shamanism. The longer chapters are completed by a concluding, analytical section.

Merkur's mastery of the ethnographic literature on the Inuit gives one pause before suggesting interpretations different from the author's. However, given the limitations of the available data, Merkur is well aware that some of his conclusions are conjectural, whereas others are more clear-cut and certain; he carefully distinguishes between the two.

One minor quibble concerns Merkur's discussion at the end of the chapter on the Sea Mother. Merkur convincingly argues that for certain of the Inuit subcultures, "Uniting both indweller and spirit in herself, she became a *coincidentia oppositorum* that resolves metaphysical dualism in an ultimate unity" (p. 140). He subsequently points out that in the relevant subcultures, "The laity conceive of the animals' Mothers as the heads of pantheons; but . . . shamans have obtained the concept of henotheism" (p. 141). The conclusion is then related to the ongoing scholarly argument over whether or not the concept of a Supreme Being is to be found in non-Western cultures. Contrary to Merkur's position, to this reviewer neither an experience of unity transformed into a metaphysical understanding nor henotheism necessarily denote a Supreme Being. The concept of a Supreme Being certainly assumes at least a semi-monotheistic culture, and Merkur frequently points out that Inuit religion is polytheistic, and normally connotes a male creator, an understanding of a beginning of time, and a hierarchical sociopolitical structure.

In an "Afterword," the author speculates on indigenous aspects of Inuit religion and those that arose from diffusion. In this discussion, he posits that "Raven and the Sea Mother were inspired by a diffusion from Polynesia" (p. 255). Alternative sources of diffusion, however, may be considered. In some of the Inuit myths, Raven is linked to the sun (see pp. 220-221). In China, for over 3500 years, Raven has been the primary theriomorphic image linked to the sun. In addition, there are virtually identical sun-shooting myths in early China and Californian native cultures. Hence, the question of diffusion is problematic: Is the source early China or Polynesia, or is there a common progenitor for both?

On the other hand, the concept of the Sea Mother, especially as a replacement for the Earth Mother, may not be due to diffusion at all. In coastal China, Ma-tzu developed as a Sea Mother in fishing villages at least a thousand years ago. When people of this subculture emigrated to Taiwan, bringing Ma-tzu with them as their

primary deity, she became Earth Mother for those who took up farming. Similarly in central west African cultures, the fishing cultures emphasized the Sea Mother as a primary deity. Hence, as the precursors to Inuit culture developed a technology that shifted the economic focus to the Arctic Ocean from caribou hunting, so the shift of an Earth Mother to a Sea Mother may be a natural human proclivity.

Further scholarly developments may enhance some of Merkur's analyses. The phenomenon of the Moon Man, or Brother Moon and Sister Sun, is an intriguing one because it reverses the normative gender orientations of the Moon and the Sun. Merkur points out several anomalies in regard to them. New studies indicating the enormous differences in the appearance of the moon and the sun in the high arctic as compared to the rest of the planet may advance his analysis.

In summary, aside from alternative explanations of minor points made by this author, it is difficult to fault Merkur's innovative and careful analysis of diverse, difficult and often flawed ethnographic accounts. A map, allowing the many different references to arctic regions and cultures to be easily located, would have been useful. *Powers Which We Do Not Know* will long serve as the definitive study of Inuit beliefs and religious understanding.