

## NETSILIK ESKIMO: Metaphors

This essay will explain and discuss metaphors as symbolically used by the Netsilik Eskimo. A metaphor is a form of thought and language that asserts a meaningful link between two expressions from different semantic domains, one being the metaphorical subject, which needs to be clarified, and secondly the metaphorical predicate, which can be used to clarify the metaphorical subject.

## NESILIK ESKIMO

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The metaphor for the Netsilik Eskimo arises out of the myths about the origins of the world which morally linked the Netsilik to the animals they hunted giving rise to a set of moral standards on which their community is based. The metaphor is composed of three elements morality, weather, and animals. The metaphor is a three way triangle; weather provided the Netsilik with explanations about nature and the origins of the world, animals provided the Netsilik with a belief that they are equal to humans, which gave the Netsilik a notion about animal life as being as important as human life, and at the top of the triangle, morality which both weather and animal beliefs provided the Netsilik with.

The metaphor begins with a belief in spirits who rule the forces of nature and observe the mistreatment of animals. This observation provided a set of rules as to how animals and humans should be morally treated because the Netsilik believe that animal and human souls were equal.

The spirits that the Netsilik believed in were composed of Nuliajuk, Narssuk, Tatque, and animal spirits. These spirits were believed to control nature (weather) and the game that the Netsilik hunted for, which made the belief in these spirits part of daily survival. Therefore, Netsilik survival depended on the rules and taboos that

were set by these spirits. These spirits were linked to humanity because they all involved myths about humans who were mistreated and in their circumstances, came to control nature's elements in which they were thrown into.

The myth of Nuliajuk discusses how an orphan girl had been pushed into the ocean and became the goddess of the ocean with the ability, for example, to make seal disappear from under harpoons. The Netsilik could soothe her only by observing animal taboos that she would reward with fish in return.

Narssuk the giant baby and weather God observed as his mother and father got killed in battle which resulted in the hatred of mankind. Narssuk had to be wrapped in caribou skins and thongs to keep him from producing bad weather.

Tatque, the moon spirit had no anger towards man but was forced to kill her mother. She then fell in love with a brother spirit, they journeyed surpassing the sky, and became the moon and sun spirits. These spirits produced good effects, as the Netsilik believed that if a woman slept exposed during a full moon, she would become pregnant.

These spirits demonstrated a link between humans and spirits, as the spirits themselves were once human. These beliefs also demonstrated that the Netsilik viewed their hardships of weather & hunting as forces of evil rather than a natural cycle. Furthermore events that seemed to cause no harm or were in different to the Netsilik daily survival were viewed as good. Netsilik belief in spirits provided explanations for all evil that was created by evil spirits who were once human, as being their fault for the breaking of taboos. Therefore observing taboos became an important base for morality in Netsilik society.

In essence souls and spirits are the basis of Netsilik society. The Netsilik assumed that the sea spirit Nuliajuk, the weather God Narssuk, and the Moon spirit Tatque, were personally owned and at their service, provided the taboos concerning animals were observed. The Netsilik also believed that the misplaced evil spirits of the Nuliajuk and Narssuk Gods were the main causes for hazardous weather. This explains why the Netsilik killed a person who became possessed with evil spirits to prevent him/her from entering the domains where more harms could be caused to the Netsilik game and environment. Spirits came into being as a result of wrongdoing of man on earth and these taboos of good and evil established moral order for the Netsilik community. These spirits controlled the natural world and

human life and were responsible for the presence or absence of game. This meant that the spirits ruled social life and survival.

The importance of animal souls and animal treatment also provided the Netsilik with another set of social morals. Animal beliefs provided the Netsilik with, morality, descriptions of good and evil, and names describing talented individuals. For example, the fox, the Netsilik believed, created darkness and because he stole from human caches he represented evil. The hare created daylight signifying well as lightness provides light which enables one to find a place to feed, which in Netsilik eyes, represented good. This demonstrates how the Netsilik used animal characteristics to judge whether one was good or bad. Similarly the Netsilik transferred animal attributes to describe talents that were found in individual hunters.

The Netsilik used animal names to describe members of their community that were thought to be super beings. For example, Totalet stood for seal men, Ijerket stood for peculiar eyes. The men had animal characteristics and were talented in an animal like feature. In essence, names for the Netsilik possessed characterisation of their own and protected the bearer against misfortunes related to the talent that the name implied. Names were even thought to make the offspring healthier. Animal spirits or souls were believed to be recycled and this process is called cosmic recycling. This cosmic recycling of animal souls provided a key to morality. In sum animal names played the same role as amulets did in that they brought good luck to the hunter or described animal characteristics that the hunter possessed.

The Netsilik also treated the animals with much respect even after they were killed. Here are some examples: A freshly killed seal was never to be laid on the floor because the animal soul would be offended as it was laid to rest where women had walked. Giving water to a seal after it was killed would show gratitude towards the seal and therefore, it would reincarnate into another seal body allowing it-self to be killed by the same harpooner. Scraping of a caribou was forbidden during hunting because if caribou witnessed the butchering of one of their kind it would make them selves less willing to be caught the next time. Only a wife's hunter could skin the legs of a caribou because they were very sensitive to strangers. The bear was a dangerous soul and the Netsilik believed that once the bear was killed it's soul remained on the tip of their spheres for four to five days where no work could be done during this period. If any work was to be done on their leisters, hunters had to leave the stone weir and hide behind a rock to avoid offending the salmon.

The examples demonstrate how taboos relating to animals dictated the way in which the Netsilik behaved. It demonstrated their belief that animal and human souls are equal and it also shows how the animal souls affected their perception of the relationship between life & death as the animals were treated better once they were dead. In sum animals provided the Netsilik with rules on morality in terms of characteristics of good and evil.

Finally, the after life, and the promise of going to what the Netsilik would think of as the promise land, provided the Netsilik Eskimo with the incentive to be the best hunters while on earth which gave them a healthy ideology to help them survive in their environment. These places in the after life consisted of Agneriatarfik, Aglermiut, and Noqumut.

Agneriatarfik, located in the sky, is a happy place, is plenty of food and receives help from the sky spirits by providing seal. Only clever energetic hunters and those who have died of violent deaths go up there. Aglermiut is located in the underworld and living conditions are as good as in the sky spirits. Women were only allowed into these good places if they had gone through the pain of being tattooed. This showed woman's courage and ability to endure pain. The taboos also observed that one would go to these places and remain there forever which provided an incentive for the Netsilik to die young so that they could be young forever. This promise of an after life with plenty of everything also played a role and facilitated suicide. Noqumiut is located under the under world where there is little food and where the lazy and untattooed women go. In sum the after life provided another reason for the Netsilik to work vigorously while on earth for the after life offered as easier way of life. One could even be reckless as the after life myth guaranteed anyone who died violently of healthy living.

In conclusion the metaphor that the Netsilik experienced was triangular and was composed of weather & animals with morality interwoven between the former. The start of the metaphor began with myths about the forces of nature and ended with myths about what the after life was like. In the middle, morality acted as a strict condition to the origins of the world, the cycle of human & animal lives and the after life and therefore confined the Netsilik to its social rules.

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