

IVORY, ANTLER, FEATHER AND WOOD: MATERIAL CULTURE AND THE COSMOLOGY OF THE CUMBERLAND SOUND INUIT, BAFFIN ISLAND, CANADA

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ABSTRACT/RESUME

The author reviews several Central Inuit myths and analyzes them in structural terms. She concludes that the series of oppositions which results indicates critical social concepts of the Thule culture. Furthermore these oppositions and social concepts are reflected in the material culture of these people. Material culture can thus be seen to carry important social messages as do myths and kinship systems.

L'auteur examine plusieurs mythes de l'Inuit Central et les analyse d'une manière structurale. Elle conclut que les oppositions qui se font remarquer indiquent les concepts sociaux troublants de la culture Thule. En plus, les oppositions et les concepts sociaux s'inscrivent dans la culture matérielle de ces gens. Il s'ensuit que la culture matérielle ainsi que le mythe et les systèmes de famille présentent des renseignements sociaux importants.

The Canadian Journal of Native Studies VII, 2 (1987):307-321.

The analysis presented in this paper is offered with three purposes in mind. Firstly, it is intended to elucidate the cosmological thought of the Cumberland Sound Inuit by way of a structuralist analysis of two myths and an associated ritual. Secondly, it is hoped to relate the cosmological pattern so revealed to the social organization of the Inuit; and finally it is a goal to pick up the artifact types and raw materials which have emerged in the analysis as of cosmological significance and to suggest that material culture is as much a part of the structure as ritual acts or marriage arrangements (Pearce, 1987).

The Inuit groups of Cumberland Sound and the adjacent Frobisher Bay, on the south-east coast of Baffin Island, make up the most easterly of the Central Arctic communities extending westwards as far as Admundsen Gulf. To the east of these lie the Inuit groups of Greenland, and to the west those of the north and west Alaskan coast. Although the distance involved is vast, extending some four thousand five hundred miles east to west, all Inuit groups up to about AD 1600 shared a remarkably homogenous life-style. This was *characterized* as the Thule culture, which spread rapidly across the Arctic from west to east in the centuries around 1000 AD, and which is expressed by a common language, Inupik, spoken in a range of local variants, from eastern Greenland to western Alaska. After about 1600 AD the uniform cast to Thule culture becomes less obvious as local conditions changed and individual groups adapted accordingly, but there is general agreement that the Inuit of the historic period (and of the present day) are descended from Thule culture forebears, and that Thule culture lay at the root of their life-style up to the period of major European contact following the Second World War (Dumond, 1977). The lives of the Cumberland Sound communities in the pre-major contact period are principally recorded by Franz Boas who travelled in the area in 1883 and 1884, and it is upon Boas' work that this paper chiefly draws (Boas, 1964). He identified a number of groups, including the Nugumiut, who travelled between the Frobisher Bay area and Lake Amadjuaq, and the Oqomiut and Akudnirmiut of Cumberland Sound, although it seems that all these groups inter-mingled to a considerable extent (Boas, 1964:14-34).

Since Mauss' classic paper (1906) it has been recognized that Inuit life was organized around the major dichotomy of land and sea, which produced a clear seasonal distinction embracing caribou hunting on the land of the interior from temporary camps during the summer and sea mammal hunting on and near the sea ice from permanent coastal settlements during the winter. For the Cumberland Sound/Frobisher Bay groups this meant winter hunting from settlements around the edges of the bays, and summer hunting on the plateau behind the coast and the land towards Lake

Amadjuak and Lake Nettilling. This arrangement is associated with a number of social customs by which, for example, caribou skins taken in the summer may not be worked until the first seal have been caught with the harpoon, or sea mammal meat may not be eaten at the same time as venison. Walrus hide must not be taken to Lake Nettilling because this is the domain of the caribou (Boas, 1964:187).

The social organization of the Cumberland Sound groups is broadly similar to that of all the Central Arctic communities. Young people are allowed to marry as soon as they are capable of performing adult tasks, but the young man may be rejected by his prospective parents-in-law if his own parents are unwilling to have him hunt for them. Usually the couple begins married life with the wife's family, and if the man belongs to a different tribe he must join that of his wife; it is not until his parents-in-law are dead that he is finally his own master. Marriage is in many ways an economic rather than a sexual arrangement, and both parties are free to enter into any liaisons which may appeal to them. The wife's mother is a powerful figure, who may if she wishes command a divorce; re-marriage is very simple for both men and women (Boas, 1964:171).

Among the Central Arctic groups generally, the principal supernatural figure is Sedna, Mistress of the Sea and the Land Below, and there also exist a range of *tupilak*, spirits of the dead and *tornait*, the spirits of animals and natural features. These spirits can be controlled by the shamans, who are always called in in cases of sickness, and who will discover the transgressions of social rules which have caused the disorder. Dead bodies' are wrapped in caribou skin and buried as quickly as possible, and it seems that old people are buried with their feet towards the west or south-west, children with feet towards the east or south-east, and young people with feet towards the south. For three days the mourning relatives stay in the deceased's hut with their nostrils closed by a piece of caribou skin, and on the third day they visit the grave and walk round it three times sunwise, promising food which is taken later when the grave is visited, and must be venison, never sea mammal meat. As stores of venison are cached in a similar way in the autumn, it seems clear that a correspondence is perceived between dead bodies and caribou. The destination of dead souls is a little vague, but both Sedna's Belowland and Qudlivun, the Happyland in the sky, seem to be involved. The customs surrounding birth are very complex, but an important element is the birdskin gown in which the new born baby is dressed (Boas, 1964: 201-207).

We may begin to unravel some aspects of central Inuit cosmology by considering the story of Sedna and the Fulmar, widespread in the Central Arctic (see, for example, Boas, 1901:163-165, which gives a variant version

from Cumberland Sound) but recorded in its fullest form by Boas as he heard it told amongst the Oqomiut and the Akudnirmiut of Cumberland Sound (Boas, 1964:175-177), and this will be the version taken here.

Sedna And The Fulmar

Once upon a time a widower lived with his daughter Sedna, and Sedna was wooed by many youths, but she rejected them all. Finally, when the ice broke up in the Spring, a fulmar flew from over the ice and wooed Sedna, saying, "Come with me into the land of birds where there is never hunger, where my tent is made of beautiful skins and you shall rest on soft bear skins. My fellow fulmars will clothe you with their feathers, your lamp will always be full of oil and your pot with meat". Sedna went with the fulmar, but when, after a long and hard journey, they reached Birdland, Sedna discovered she had been deceived. Her new home was covered not with beautiful pelts, but with wretched fish skins. Instead of soft caribou skins, her bed was made with hard walrus hides, and she had to live on miserable fish that the birds brought. In her woe, she called out to her father to take her away.

A year later her father came, killed the fulmar in revenge, and took his daughter away in his boat. When other fulmars returned, they saw what had happened and lamented their murdered fellow as they do to this day. They flew out to sea, saw the boat and stirred up a heavy storm. In mortal peril, the father determined to offer Sedna to the birds, and threw her overboard. She clung to the edge of the boat with a death grip so the father took a knife and cut off the first joints of her fingers. When they fell into the sea they were transformed into whales. As she still clung to the boat, the second finger joints were cut off and swam away as seals, and when the father cut off the finger stumps they became ground seals. Then the storm subsided and the father allowed Sedna to climb back into the boat, and from that time she hated her father and swore revenge. After they got ashore she called her dogs and let them gnaw off her father's hands and feet while he was asleep. Then he cursed himself, his daughter and the dogs, whereupon the earth opened and swallowed the hut, the father, the daughter and the dogs. They have since lived in the land of Adlivun (Below-Land) of which Sedna is the mistress. (There seems to be an implication that the father's mutilations created the caribou, but this is not stated.)

The story has a clear underlying structure in which the two episodes in Birdland and the two episodes of mutilation balance each other as equal equivalents, marked at the beginning by the original state of Sedna and her father on the land and at the end by the earthquake and final state of the two in Below Land, and divided by the pair on the sea and the storm (Figure 1).

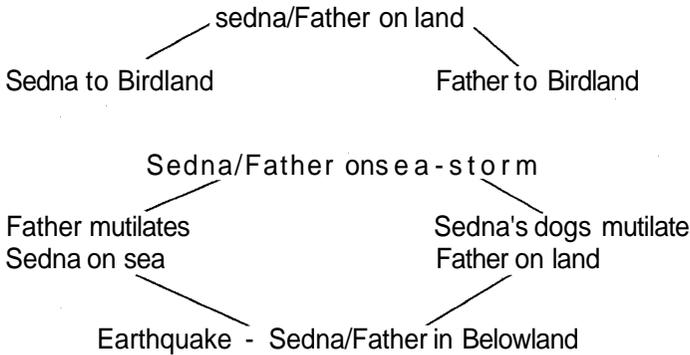


Figure 1

Once the structure is set out, it is equally clear that the first part is also opposite and equivalent to the second part, so that Land : Belowland, and Birdland : Land/Sea. Since we know from other sources that Belowland is envisaged chiefly as being under the sea (eg. Boas, 1964:196), we perceive a cosmological scheme which has Birdland above and Belowland below, with land, that is the ordinary tundra, between but nearer Birdland, and the sea, including the sea ice and the shore, between but nearer Belowland.

This scheme is amplified when the opposed segments of the story are analyzed into the sets of binary pairs of which they are composed (Figure 2).

When these are reduced to a single set by amalgamating the repetitions (Figure 3), it emerges that the left half represents Land, and to the Land belongs men, caribou and animal products, which certainly include bear and caribou skins, and also other materials from species unspecified. The right half has, as we would expect, two parts representing Birdland to which belong birds and fish, and Belowland to which belong the sea and the sea mammals, while women and daughters belong with both.

To this scheme we can probably add the yearly cycle. Both trips to Birdland are made during the early summer so the implication would be that Belowland belongs with the winter half of the year, and this, of course, matches cultural practice by which the caribou is hunted in summer and the sea mammals in winter. It is also clear that the story marks the end of winter and the beginning of summer, the time when the ice starts to break up. We can also add a social dimension. It is clear that men belong with the summer caribou-hunting on land, and women with both summer Birdland and

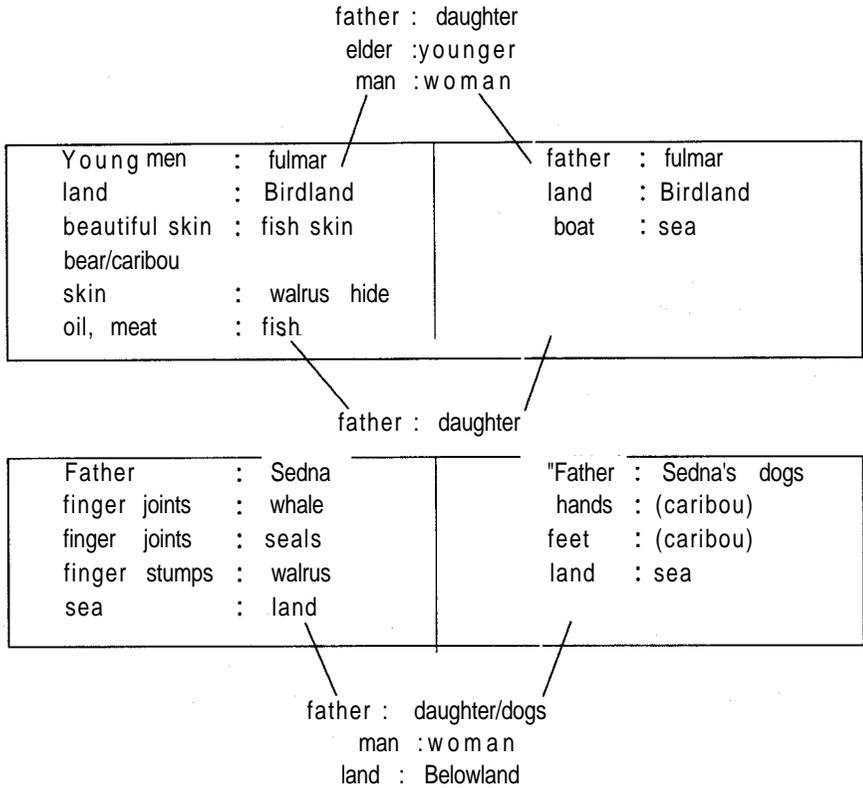


Figure 2

father : daughter
 men : women
 men : birds
 land : Birdland
 animal products : fish
 ** **
 Caribou : seammals
 land : Belowland
 land : sea
 men : women
 father : daughter

Figure 3

the winter sea but the story seems to be telling us more than this. The young suitors, and the fulmar are clearly equivalents, but the Father also seems to be their *alter ego* in that, as in the first Birdland episode the fulmar supersedes the young men, so in the second episode the father supersedes the fulmar, and the mutilation of Sedna by her father has more than a hint of incest. Sedna retaliates by mutilating him, through her second *persona*, her dogs, but although all of this can scarcely be called domestic content, it should be noted that Sedna found Birdland bitterly disappointing, and that Father and daughter remain together at the end of the story. The implication seems to be that daughters serve their own interests best by putting their fathers before their husbands, and in this the myth reflects the normal arrangements of early marriage, and relates social aberrations to the land of Birds.

Why Birdland should be a source of tension seems to be illuminated by a second myth, that of the Goose-Maiden, and this story also shows why birds and fish fall into the same segment of the structure, since it is precisely this segment which the story describes. The myth is wide-spread through the Inuit world (Kleivan, 1962) and three variants have been collected from Cumberland Sound (Kleivan, 1962:11-12). The version chosen for analysis here is Kleivan's *Baffin 1* collected and published by Boas (1964:206-210), but to it I have added the details from *Baffin 2*, collected by Rev. E.J. Peck and published by Boas (1901:337-340) which describe Itiqtaujaq's journey. The swimming creatures are usually described as naked women, who have left their feather clothes, here referred to as boots, behind on the shore.

The Goose Maiden

A man named Itiqtaujaq (which means "anus-like") saw a lake where many geese were swimming. On the shore he saw boots, which he stole. The birds flew away, but one remained and agreed to become his wife if her boots were returned. She was transformed into a woman and had a son. But she refused to eat whale meat or to let it soil her clothes, and she went to the beach, collected feathers, put them on herself and her son, and they flew away as geese. Itiqtaujaq followed her, crossing a boiling kettle by treading on the pieces of meat, a burning lamp by treading on the pieces of blubber, rushing between two fighting monsters who took off part of his coat tail, and passing between two clashing stones which also took part of his coat tail. He reached a river where Eqaluqdujuq (= the little salmon) was chopping chips from a piece of wood; when these fell into the water they became salmon. This Salmon-father was hollow, and Itiqtaujaq saw it but pretended that he had come from a side direction from which he could not see the hollowness. Salmon-father showed him where his wife was, and gave him a salmon backbone which became a boat and carried him there. He had been told not to look, looks, is nearly upset, and closes his eyes again.

He reaches his wife and son. Her new husband, herself and her son were transformed into geese by feathers taken from a wooden box, but before the wife could fly away, Itiqtaujaq cut open her belly and many eggs fell out. The old husband and the wife are apparently left together, perhaps with the son.

The story has a simpler structure than that of *Sedna and the Fulmar*, showing us land in opposition to Birdland, and giving two opposed episodes, each involving action on the land at lake or river followed by progress to Birdland, bracketed by the solitary man at the beginning and the family at the end (Figure 4).

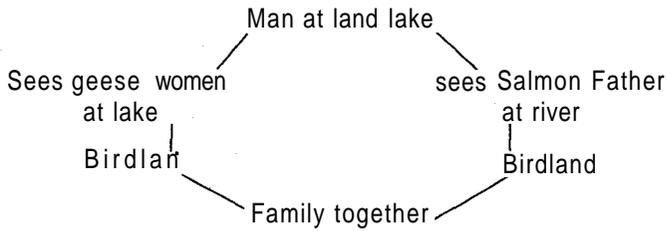


Figure 4

These opposed segments can be analyzed into their binary pairs (Figure 5):

		fire	:	blubber
		water	:	meat
	(clashing)	vulva	:	penis(hem)
seeing	:	man	:	salmon father
man	:	wood shaving	:	salmon
naked	:	seeing	:	not seeing
		hollow	:	right direction
		(side)		
maiden	:	husband	:	wife
mother	:	father	:	son
whale				
blood	:	boat	:	salmon
naked	:	seeing	:	not seeing
man	:	father	:	son
		human	:	bird
		husband	:	husband
	(eggs)	vulva	:	penis (knife)
		naked	:	feathered
		man	:	family

Figure 5

These in turn can be amalgamated into a single set (Figure 6):

Birdland	:	Land
woman	:	man
geese maidens	:	salmon father
vulva	:	penis
feathered	:	naked
wife	:	husband
mother	:	father
feathers	:	wood

Figure 6

It seems clear that the right hand column contains a number of references to sexual intercourse, represented by the eggs : knife, the clashing rocks : coat hem, the monsters : coat hem, and probably also the boiling water : meat, and the burning oil : blubber. Three times the man sees something which he should not, the Geese Maidens bathing, the hollowness of Salmon-father and the glance he takes from the boat. This motif of seeing : not seeing seems to serve the same function as noise in the Sedna story, and to separate the phases of the action, but, of course, it also carries the resonance of our understanding which gradually becomes clearer. The strange hollowness of Salmon-father, however, is difficult to relate to the rest.

The analysis shows that women, geese, mothers and feathers are all associated with Birdland, while men, salmon, fathers and wood belong with the Land; indeed it seems that salmon, penises and men are to be regarded as equivalents, and, taken with the fact that salmon are caught from the land in summer, we can see why the fish occupy the cosmological positions which they do. Women belong with Birdland and, as the sexual motifs show, this is a danger to men; equally threatening is the woman's tendency to take her son to Birdland with her. With this is linked the identification of Inuit babies as little birds because the first dress which they wear is made of feathers, and this dress, as we shall see, retains its significance through life. The bird identification is made the vehicle for expressing the danger to a man and husband embodied in the social custom which permits women wide choice of sexual partners. A man does not know whether the person he calls "son" is in fact his son by blood or not, but the woman, of course, has no such difficulties. The story expresses the struggle of the man to retain his powers over wife and son, both of whom are necessary to his economic well-being, now and in the future.

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Many of the elements from these two myths re-appear in the rituals enacted at the Beginning-of-Winter feast to mark the first formation of the

sea ice, as it is held among the Nugumiut and other groups of Cumberland Sound. (Boas [1964:195-198] records the version used here; a similar version is recorded in Boas, 1901:138-141).

The Beginning-of-Winter Festival At Cumberland Sound And Nugumiut

When the ice floes form and clash noisily together, dangerous spirits try to bring bad luck, and the worst of these is Sedna, mistress of the Underworld who rises from under the ground. The most powerful shaman drives her away by pretending to harpoon her through a rope coiled like seal's breathing hole. This even is celebrated by a great festival, but to protect themselves against Sedna's return, all the people wear a portion of their babyhood feather dress on the end of their hoods. Early in the morning, the men gather in the middle of the settlement. Most run sun-wise screaming and jumping around the houses, but those born by abnormal presentations wear women's *clothes and run* in the opposite direction. The women of the houses throw out a dish containing pieces of meat, articles of seal skin and ivory trinkets, and the men struggle for these.

Next the men divide into the ptarmigans, those born in the winter, and the ducks, those born in the summer, and the two groups contest a tug-of-war. Then each drinks from a large kettle of water, and declares his/her name and place of birth, beginning with the oldest, who are heard with respect and ending with the youngest who are greeted with raillery.

Then two gigantic figures, the *qailertetang*, wearing heavy boots, with their legs thickened out by several pairs of trousers, their shoulders covered by women's outer jackets and their faces by tattooed sealskin masks, appear from a hut. Each carried a seal harpoon in his right hand and a scraper in his left, and on his back is an inflated sealskin buoy. They pair off the men and women and the pairs spend the following day and night together. The *qailertetang* then go down to the beach and invoke the north wind which brings good weather and warn off the unfavourable south wind.

After this invocation (and presumably before they go with their women to the huts) the men pretend to attack the *qailertetangs*, and they both act as if they have been killed. They are brought back to life with water, and as each man gives them a drink, he asks about his future and receives answers which he must interpret for himself.

Here again a binary structure is apparent, in which the struggle between Sedna and the shamans is paired with the tug-of-war, and the circuit of the settlement episode is paired with that of the *qailertetang*. The scheme is bracketed by the past year at the beginning and the predictions for the future at the end, *and punctuated* by noise and gifts of seal products and ivory, and fresh water (Figure 7).

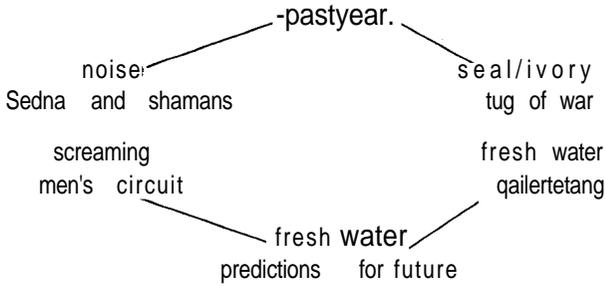


Figure 7

These actions, too, are analysed into their opposed pairs (Figure 8):

	new year	:	old year			
	beginning	:	of winter	:	end of summer	
Below land	:	Land		ptarmigans	:	ducks
down	:	up		Winter	:	Summer
Sedna	:	feather dre		backwards	:	forwards
				old	:	young
abnormal men	:	normal men		qailertetang	:	normal men
men's clothes	:	women's clothes		men's clothes	:	women's clothes
sun-wise	:	anti sun-wise		harpoon	:	scraper
men	:	women		men	:	women
				south	:	north
				death	:	life
				new year	:	old year

Figure 8

These are further reduced to a single set (Figure 9):

new year	:	old year
winter	:	summer
Belowland	:	Land
Sedna (Belowland)	:	Birdland (feather dress, birds)
opposed movement	:	opposed movement
abnormal men	:	normal men
women	:	men
old	:	young
dangerous/unlucky	:	lucky/safe
life	:	death
new year	:	old year

Figure 9

We can see the now-familiar cosmography of Belowland : Land : Birdland, put into the cycle of the changing year through the opposition of winter, with which Belowland belongs, and summer, with which Birdland belongs, and represented by the opposed movements of the tug-of-war and the shamans' struggle with Sedna. Linked with the land, but also with Birdland because all Inuit are birds as the feather dresses and the division into Ducks and Ptarmigans shows, are normal men, regarded, as usual, as the human and social norm, and those natural elements like the north wind or the sun's movements which are regarded as safe or usual. Linked with Belowland here are women (although as the Goose-Maiden story has shown, women have their part in Birdland), and that cluster of elements which are abnormal and unlucky or dangerous if used wrongly, but also powerful and life-giving. The pairing off of the men and women by the *qailler-tetang* at this crisis of the year underlines the changeability of sexual relationships, unlike the relatively stable economic relationship of marriage, and the social consequences which the Goose Maiden myth explores, while the declarations of home and origin in which revered age is contrasted with unregarded youth echoes the tension between the generations expressed in *Sedna and the Fu/mar*.

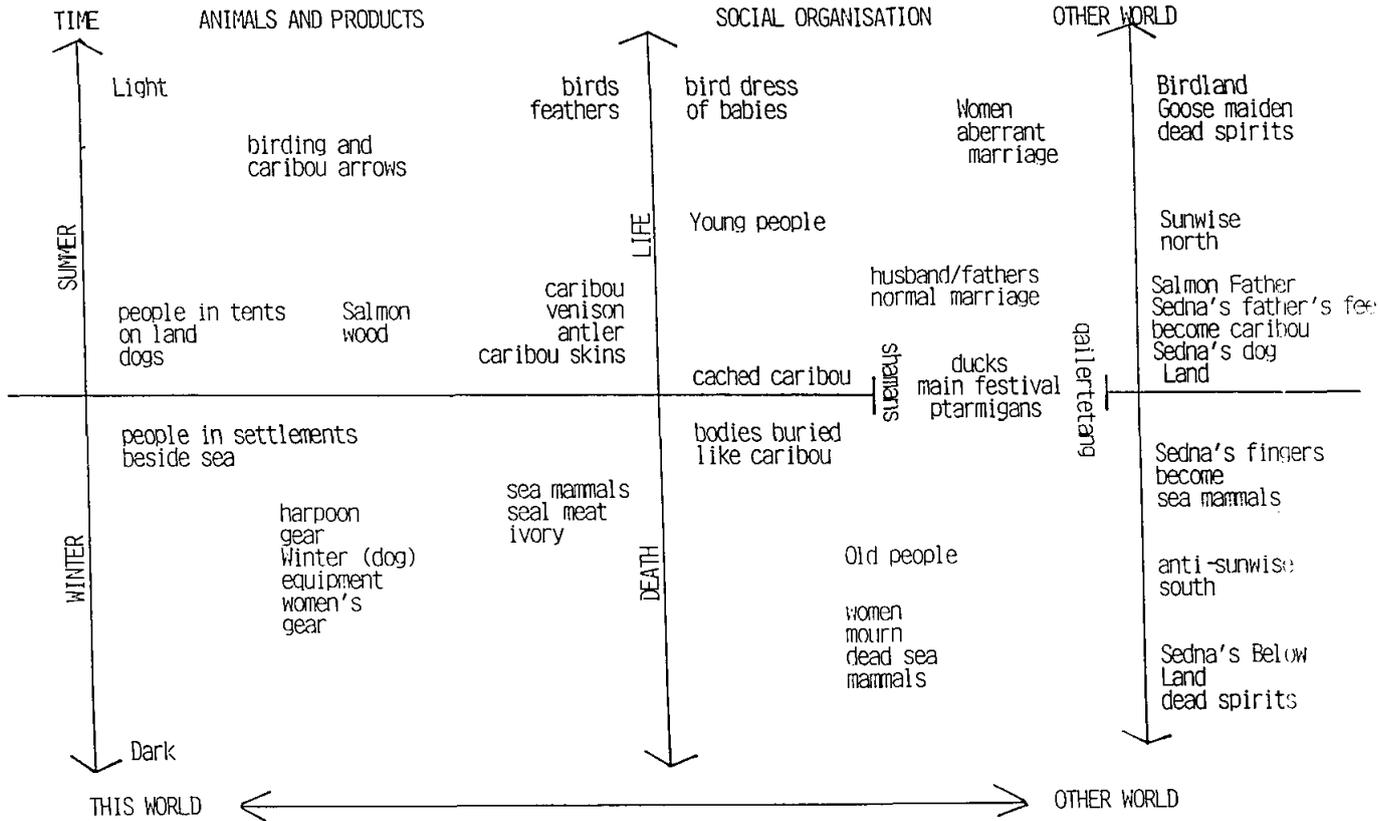
To this analysis of myth and ritual can be added the corresponding analysis of daily life. The short description of Cumberland Sound Inuit life with which we began can be broken down into an obvious set of opposed pairs (Figure 10):

Winter	:	Summer
Sea	:	Land
Sea Mammals	:	Caribou
Women	:	Men

Figure 10

The analysis by McGhee (1977) of five collections of Inuit material culture, one of which came from a range of middle-to-late Thule sites on Cumberland Sound (Schledermann, 1975), showed a clear tendency for caribou hunting arrow-heads to be made of caribou antler and the artifacts of winter (snow and dog equipment), seal hunting, bird hunting, and of women (sewing equipment) to be made of sea mammal ivory or bone, a distinction which does not reflect practical considerations. The same distinction has shown up in other Inuit collections (Pearce, 1988) and it suggests that to the opposed groups given above should be added ivory : antler. The Goose Maiden story suggests that feather : wood should also be added. The importance of this is its demonstration that material culture,

Figure 11



which until recently has been given a rather low intellectual rating among social anthropologists, carries just as many social messages as myths or kinship systems, and should be an integral part of any overall cultural analysis.

What this whole analysis might look like for the Cumberland Sound communities is set out in Figure 11. This shows the integrated structure which articulates around the oppositions of Winter : Summer, Life : Death and This World : Other World, and in which the cosmos has two poles, Birdland and Belowland with Land between them. Land, in all its aspects, represents the social norm, and it is associated with summer, men, caribou, the young people on whom the work and life of the group depends, and normal marriage which *does not exclude* the father/husband. Birdland represents the necessary but potentially dangerous attachment of mother to their sons, and the new-born baby which everybody once was, while the Sea and Belowland embodies the claims of the old, linked with winter, women and the sea mammals. Into this scheme fits the material culture, so that, for example, the thrust of the winter harpoon unites the opposites of wood and sea ivory to kill sea mammals which give food and ivory. The flight of a summer birding arrow unites the opposites of wood and feathers into a weapon which will kill a bird who will appear again as the dress of a new baby, while the bird is identified as female and the arrow through its wood : salmon : penis equation as male, so the shooting is a metaphor for the sexual act, which will also result in a new baby, with the social tensions which family life implies.

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