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Inuit Myth in the Film “Brother Bear”

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In a recent children’s film entitled *Brother Bear*, several aspects of Inuit culture are portrayed. The film begins by introducing three brothers in an Inuit village. When one brother is killed in an altercation with a bear, another brother kills the bear to avenge his brother’s death. The local shaman disagrees with this action, and transforms the brother into a bear. The last brother, thinking the bear had killed his second brother, attempts to kill the newly transformed bear to avenge both of his brother’s deaths. Several key aspects of the film were most likely highly researched. The film connects several common themes, especially in the areas of Inuit common practices and mythology. Although the film incorporated numerous elements for children, including two humorous talking moose, the Inuit cultural elements are illustrated remarkably well. Additionally, the depictions of nature in the film are highly accurate. The movie displays numerous scenes in the forests of the Pacific Northwest region of the United States, and others in the mountainous regions. The movie draws inspiration from Native American tribes sometime within the last two centuries. However, some aspects were chronologically inaccurate. For example, the presence of woolly mammoths distorts the period somewhat. Largely, the film portrayed the Inuit lifestyle in an accurate way. The most clearly congruent elements were those of musical ceremony practices, animal spirit totems, revenge practices, and shamanistic influences. These factors show that the film represented common Inuit practices correctly.¹

¹ *Brother Bear*, directed by Robert Walker and Aaron Blaise. (2003; Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Feature Animation, 2004), DVD.

Musical ceremonies played an important role in the Inuit culture.² The Inuit often had celebrations with shamans that commonly involved music. While many of these ceremonies revolved around celebrating fertility, manhood ceremonies were also common.³ In the film, the



manhood ceremony was a key component to Inuit life. Men were celebrated in a musical ceremony when they proved their worth to their community. The film depicted men placing their handprint on a wall in a “wall of fame”

manner.⁴ While there is no evidence to show that whether this is a common practice, the involvement of music and dance is accurate. In Inuit culture, the entire community is involved with the ceremony, which is reflected in the film. Additionally, the film depicted the giving of an animal totem necklace to

To this day, music plays a large role in Inuit ceremonies.

Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons

a young man at his coming-of-age ceremony. While the significance of the totem will be discussed later, the concept of gift giving is ubiquitous in Inuit culture.⁵ Many of the ceremonies included a special emphasis on distributing gifts. However, the gifts were primarily articles of clothing and shoes, woven baskets and other practical objects.⁶ Although the film centered on the musical aspects and not the giving of gifts, the ceremonial practices appear, for the most part, accurately represented. In most cases, celebratory ceremonies involve numerous drummers and community members dancing. Music played a role in ceremonial practices, but the film depicted a slightly altered form of the manhood ceremony.⁷

² James Houston, “Inuit Myth and Legend,” *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, 2012, <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com/articles/inuit-myth-and-legend>. 1

³ Dorothy Harley Eber, “Recording the Spirit World,” *Natural History* 111, no. 7 (September 2002): 4

⁴ *Brother Bear*, directed by Robert Walker and Aaron Blaise. (2003; Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Feature Animation, 2004), DVD.

⁵ Wendell H. Oswalt, *Alaskan Eskimos*. (San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Company, 1967), 227.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 228.

⁷ *Brother Bear*, directed by Robert Walker and Aaron Blaise. (2003; Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Feature Animation, 2004), DVD.

The second aspect of Inuit culture examined was the influence of animal spirit totems. In the film, when a boy came of age, a shaman revealed to him what his spirit animal was. For example, a young man could be given the "eagle of guidance."⁸ The person would have to observe the qualities of the animal and use them in a positive way to show his community that he had matured. As in many Native American myths, the animal spirits are extremely influential to Inuit culture. The Inuits believe that animals, humans, and the Earth are all connected with one another, which is illustrated in the movie.⁹ In the film, a person may take on the form of their spirit animal after they die.¹⁰ This belief was also held by the Inuits, but usually this was a power of the shaman. The shamans would allegedly turn people into animals or turn into animals themselves.¹¹ The Inuit concept of human-animal transformation closely resembles the event in the film. However, there are many Inuit myths involving spontaneous transformation into an animal, usually a bear or a seal. This may suggest that shamans play a role in the transformation.¹² Particularly, the notion that wrongdoing could warrant a transformation into an animal is accurate. This idea strongly matches the views of the Inuit. One of the primary concerns when hunting was to be respectful of the animals, for the Inuit



Inuits placed much emphasis on animals and animal spirits, as shown in this woven basket.

Photo Courtesy of
Wikimedia Commons

⁸ *Brother Bear*, directed by Robert Walker and Aaron Blaise. (2003; Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Feature Animation, 2004), DVD.

⁹ Mark A. Shibley "Sacred Nature: Earth-based Spirituality as Popular Religion in the Pacific Northwest," *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature & Culture* 5, no. 2 (June 2011): 170.

¹⁰ *Brother Bear*, directed by Robert Walker and Aaron Blaise. (2003; Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Feature Animation, 2004), DVD.

¹¹ Dorothy Harley Eber, "Recording the Spirit World," *Natural History* 111, no. 7 (September 2002): 7.

¹² Stith Thompson, *Tales of the North American Indians*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966), 165.

relied on them for sustenance. If animals were treated poorly, the offenders often had illness or other bad fortune thrust on them.¹³

Perhaps the most accurate part of the film was the idea that a man's brother was responsible for avenging his death. In Inuit culture, there are essentially no ramifications for a homicide. The community took no action for most crimes other than a general shunning of the person. In most tribes, it was the responsibility of the victim's eldest son or brother to exact revenge for the family.¹⁴ Young children were taught that revenge for a killing was necessary and the eldest son or brother of the victim must take revenge, or the family member who was killed was not properly honored.¹⁵ In the film, this concept is utilized properly, as the victim's brother attempts to slay the bear that killed his brother. When the brother is transformed into a bear, his other brother tirelessly chases the human-turned-bear to properly avenge his brothers' deaths.¹⁶ Some Inuit myths describe the importance of killing anything or anyone that brings harm to their village. In one myth, a group of siblings kills a woman for turning herself into a bear and eating their brother.¹⁷ Generally, the Inuit myths contain much emphasis on revenge, especially in the case of a family member. The plot of the film mirrors this emphasis truthfully.

¹³ Dorothy Harley Eber, "Recording the Spirit World," *Natural History* 111, no. 7 (September 2002): 6.

¹⁴ Wendell H. Oswalt, *Alaskan Eskimos*. (San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Company, 1967), 184.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 185

¹⁶ *Brother Bear*, directed by Robert Walker and Aaron Blaise. (2003; Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Feature Animation, 2004), DVD.

¹⁷ Stith Thompson, *Tales of the North American Indians*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966), 167.

A major part of the film was the incorporation of shamanism. Inuit culture is centered on religion, especially with the influence of a shaman. Shamans acted as liaisons between the real world and the spirit world and were highly regarded by all of the members of a community.¹⁸



An example of an Inuit shaman in full dress.

Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons

Shamans were known to control malevolent spirits in the community. However, their main purpose was to help the well-being of people in the village by influencing weather, curing the sick, predicting the future, and making animals amenable to capture.¹⁹ In the film, the shaman was responsible for mediating between the villagers and for guiding young men to fulfill their destinies. The shaman was also responsible for announcing what a young man's spirit animal would be.

She led all of the ceremonies, including the manhood ceremonies and funerary ceremonies.²⁰ These responsibilities are similar to what an Inuit shaman would do for his or her village. In both the film and in sources examined, shamans had the main duty of summoning spirits to

aid them or the village. In the film, the shaman woman summoned the spirit of the man killed by the bear to ask him for guidance. The spirit advised her to turn his brother into a bear.²¹ Overall, the shamanistic elements of the film were portrayed quite accurately.

In conclusion, many aspects of the film represented true to life parts of Inuit culture. The use of such elements added an educational facet to an otherwise purely entertaining enterprise. Though some aspects were not accurate, the creators made the most influential elements correct.

¹⁸ Jarich Oosten, Frédéric Laugrand, and Cornelius Remie. "Perceptions of Decline: Inuit Shamanism in the Canadian Arctic," *Ethnohistory* 53, no. 3 (Summer 2006): 447.

¹⁹ Wendell H. Oswalt, *Alaskan Eskimos*. (San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Company, 1967), 222.

²⁰ *Brother Bear*, directed by Robert Walker and Aaron Blaise. (2003; Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Feature Animation, 2004), DVD.

²¹ *Ibid.*

Additionally, the truth to these parts of the film added richness that pure cinematography likely could not provide. The accurateness of the music and dance that accompanied ceremonies illustrated a key part of Inuit life. Furthermore, the use of animal spirits in the film was not only central to the plot but to the Native American culture. The aspect of revenge is not widely known, but was vital to the film as well. Finally, the concept of shamanism was important to include. As a whole, the Inuit cultural components were portrayed in a positive, accurate manner.

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