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Smith
May 1894

NOTES ON ESKIMO TRADITIONS.

By HARLAN I. SMITH.

Most of the households in the Eskimo village, belonging to the World's Columbian Exposition, were from localities under missionary influences. Two families, however, were from Nachvak, farther north than the others, and at some distance from Rama, the most northern mission. From Conieossuck, the head of one of these households, through the medium of Georgie Deer, a bright Eskimo from Rigoulette, were obtained the two tales which follow; the narrator reciting a few words at a time, and pausing until these were interpreted and written out.^a

I. OLÜNGWA.^b

In the old times, Sedna^c came up to the surface of the water, and while there was seen by an old heathen^d woman named Olüngwa, who

^aThe Eskimo story teller, of which class there is usually a representative in each village, is obliged to narrate the stories correctly, as it is considered a part of the duty of the audience to correct his inaccuracies.

^bThis story seemed to be made up of several short parts, some of which are apparently incomplete and show but little relation to each other. Collected October 2, 1893. Olüngwa, as the writer understands, was a medicine woman, perhaps an *angakok*, or possibly a *pivdlerortok*, "a mad or delirious person," able to foretell events, unfold the thoughts of others, and "even gifted with a faculty of walking upon the water, besides the highest perfection in divining, but was at the same time greatly feared." (Rink's *Tales and Traditions of the Eskimo*, p. 56.)

^c"Sedna" has been substituted in each case for the following words of the interpreter, "the woman whose fingers had been cut off," as it is supposed that the phrase refers to her. Their Supreme Being is a woman whose name is Sedna." (Boas, "Central Eskimo," 6th An. Rep. Bur. Ethnology, p. 583.)

When telling of Sedna, Conieossuck and his wife would clutch the top of the table, from the side, then letting go the right hand would draw it edgewise over the fingers of the left, or she would hold both hands while he struck them with the edge of his, thus representing the cutting off of Sedna's fingers, the story of which also is related in Boas's "Central Eskimo."

^d"Heathen" was used almost invariably by the Christianized Eskimo at the village to designate those from the north of Labrador, or even their own ancestors previous to their conversion by the Moravian missionaries. In this instance, however, it was probably used by the interpreter to signify medicine or *angakok*, and in footnote 7 of this tale the reference to "*angakok*" must be understood in this connection.

had been left on an island, with two or three children, by a party of heathen, while on their way to visit other heathen.

Olüngwa wanted Sedna to go below the water again, and so went walking out to her upon the water and combed her hair.^a

After Olüngwa combed her hair, she returned to the bottom.

There was a party of heathen men talking about something in a dark house, where there was no light. In the winter one of these men went out to the island because Olüngwa was there. One day Olüngwa left the man and walked on the water to her home, where her husband gave her his leader dog. She then went back to the island in the night, and, going to the door of the house, asked the man she had left on the island the day before what they had to eat.

In the winter she went home. There an old heathen^b man (angakok?) was talking with another heathen^b man about her. He would not believe her to be a heathen.^b She was listening to them, but they did not know it. He said: "How is it she can not melt solder,^c as I can do,^d if she is a heathen."^b While he was talking she came in through the door. Then she went out and took a handful of sod or turf, and going in again held it out in her hand. She said to the man who did not believe she could melt solder, "Here is some turf." She smacked her other hand on top of it several times while they looked at her. She said, "Turf now," and the last time she smacked her hand on the turf it melted, and running between her fingers fell on the floor as shining solder. The man who did not believe became ashamed, and next day went and "hung"^e himself, because he was wrong and Olüngwa could do what he could not.

^a It is supposed that Sedna's hair was infested with vermin, that after the combing all this vermin turned to seals and her hair to flaunting seaweed, and that this was done by Olüngwa as an atonement.

^b "Heathen" was used almost invariably by the Christianized Eskimo at the village to designate those from the north of Labrador, or even their own ancestors previous to their conversion by the Moravian missionaries. In this instance, however, it was probably used by the interpreter to signify medicine or angakok, and in footnote ^d of this tale the reference to "angakok" must be understood in this connection.

^c It was impossible to determine the exact significance of the word "solder," as used by the interpreter.

^d The following explanatory sentence inserted by Conieossuck at this point of the story suggests either that he did not believe in the angakok or that he understood some of the impositions used by them to impress the credulous. "He did not really melt solder. He stole it from the whites and made others believe he melted it."

^e The words of the Eskimo interpreter, and later of the informer, have often been remodeled and arranged to complete the sense; however, those included within quotation marks are exactly retained. In many cases where more specific words should be substituted the lack of familiarity with the exact sense of the words used will not permit a change.

II. THE GIRL WHO MARRIED THE JAW BONE OF A WHALE, AND THE ONE WHO MARRIED THE WING BONE OF AN EAGLE.^a

There was once a number of young girls who took for their husbands anything that they could get, even such things as stones and bones of dead animals or people.

A girl once took a stone for her husband, and because she did this she was turned into a stone.^b

Another took a whale's jaw bone for her husband,^c and then the jaw bone turned^d into a living whale, which carried her off into the water, and to an island.^e After they got to the island the whale turned into a man;^d and they lived there as man and wife. Then the father and mother^f of the girl set out in a boat to get her. Her husband, fearing she might try to get away, tied one end of a line, such as was used in fishing, around her, and fastened the end of it to a stake used in stretching skins. This stake was driven into the ground inside the tent, so that she could go out and around as far as the line would let her go.

When the girl's father and mother came to get her, she was out of the tent, and her husband was inside; so he could not see her. She kept the line as tight as usual, and, untying it from herself, tied it to a stake, so that it would be kept tight. She then got into the boat, and went off with her father and mother. Her husband thought she was there, because the line was tight. At last he pulled on the line to bring her in, but it did not move. Then he pulled harder; the stake came up, and he pulled in the line, and saw the stake at the end of it. He then went out to look for her, and saw that she was gone. So he turned into a whale,^d and went after the boat as it was going off.

When he began to catch up to the boat in which was his wife, with her father and mother, they threw out her boots. Coming to these he

^a This story in substance was also known in Greenland and is recorded as "A Tale about Two Girls." Rink, 8th Tale, p. 126, as constructed from two manuscripts, one from Labrador and the other written down in Greenland prior to 1828.

^b The girl that took the stone for a husband is not included in the story recorded by Rink.

^c In "A Tale about Two Girls," the girls were playing with the bones of the whale and eagle, and did not take the bones for their husbands, but took the living whale and eagle that came when each said she would have such a one for her husband.

^d There is no transformation of bones to animals or animals to men, and vice versa, in the tale recorded by Rink, but the real animals appear at such times, except in the one instance where the whale turns into a piece of whalebone.

^e In "A Tale about Two Girls," the whale takes the girl to the bottom of the sea, after making her eyes and ears impenetrable. There she had to pick parasitic crustaceans off his body when he was at home.

^f In the tale recorded by Rink, the brothers go for her, not the parents. They try three times before succeeding in building a boat sufficiently swift for the task of rescuing her from the whale. The one which they use rivals the sea birds in swiftness.

stopped to fight^a them, and stayed a long time until the boat had left him a long ways behind. Then he left the boots, and started after the boat. As he again neared it, they threw out her breeches and he stopped to fight^a with the breeches until the boat had left him far behind. He then gave chase again, and as he caught up with it, they threw out her coat (atigī). This was the last thing she had to throw out, and they got to the land while he was fighting with the coat. At last he left it, and went on after her. But as soon as they had reached the shore, they had left the boat and gone inland. The whale reached the boat at last, and broke it up. As he did this, his head turned to bone, and he tried to go on shore after his wife, but he could not get beyond the beach, although he rushed against it many times. At last when he found he could not go after her any farther, he turned into the bones of a whale's head.^b

Another girl took the wing bone^c of an eagle for her husband. The bone turned into an eagle,^b and carried her to a shelf of rock on the face of a cliff, from which she could not get away. Then he used to go and get rabbits^d and birds, which he took there for her to eat. The girl could not live there, as she could not get away, but had to sit still on the small shelf of rock. She could not get up if she wanted to. So every time the eagle went away after birds and rabbits, she would take the bones^e of the birds and rabbits that he had brought to her and braid them into a rope. One day he went and got a young deer^d to take to her. While he was away she made the bone string long enough to reach to the base of the cliff,^f caught a stone with it, and hauled it up. In making the bone string, she had worn off the ends of her fingers, so that the finger bones stuck out, being bare of flesh. She then went down on the string, and went home to her friends. When the eagle came back, and found her gone, he went to her tent at home and stayed near it, to try to catch her out of doors, and take her back. But before she went out, one of the men killed the eagle

^aThe exact meaning of "fight" in this connection is rather obscure, but the interpreter could give nothing more definite.

The custom of throwing out garments to attract the attention and delay pursuing animals is not uncommonly met with in English and German stories. Different garments are mentioned in "A Tale about Two Girls," but the difference in the simple enumeration of a series of garments seems of slight importance in this connection.

^bThere is no transformation of bones to animals or animals to men, and vice versa, in the tale recorded by Rink, but the real animals appear at such times, except in the one instance where the whole turns into a piece of whalebone.

^cAt this point the narrator touched his upper arm.

^dOnly birds are mentioned in "A Tale about Two Girls."

^eIn "A Tale about Two Girls," the more appropriate word "sinews" is used instead of "bones." This difference, however, may be due to difficulties in interpreting.

^fIn "A Tale about Two Girls," a kayaker, whom she saw out at sea one day, sends a boat to her at the bottom of the cliff.

with a bone arrow. When he killed the eagle, it turned into the same wing bone that the girl had taken for a husband.

III. INITIATION OF THE ANGAKOK.^a

The following information was obtained from Peter Polisher, the oldest Eskimo in the village, and familiar with English. He claimed to be of full blood, coming from Rigoulette on Hamilton Inlet. A firm believer in the Moravian teachings and an ardent reader of his Bible, printed in Eskimo dialect, he could not understand why anyone should be desirous of obtaining untrue stories, or descriptions of heathen ceremonies and beliefs; but being assured that the object was comparison with the tales and beliefs of other people, and thinking that it would be well to explain how his people had formerly lived, so that the advantages of his present faith might be made more apparent, he tried to give as much information as possible.

When the Eskimo desired to make an angakok, he said, they would take a man and double him up with his knees to his chin, tie him with seal lines as if about to kill him, and place him on the floor^b in the center of the house. After this, they put out the lights, and sang a heathen song.^c

After this the man would groan. As he groaned "the old fellow" would untie him. The seal lines used in tying him would "whip" around the house as they came undone and fell off from him, being untied and thrown back by a spirit.^d

After this ceremony of becoming untied by the spirit, he was the "head one."^e

Tasting the water.—After this, each one would give him a drink of water out of a seal-skin cup made for that special occasion.^f This drink he declared good or bad as it was given him by various persons. Sometimes he would affirm the drink to taste good at one time, and bad at another, even when it was from the same cup of water.

Fire eating.—Then they would light the stone lamps and sing a song

^a To signify a spirit or an angakok, Peter used the words "old one," "old fellow," "dark one," "bad one," "priest," "devil," or "ghost." In these words, as in most of the material obtained from Peter, it is not difficult to detect missionary influences.

^b Peter doubled himself up, to show the position, and produced a piece of seal line, such as was used in the tying.

^c Meaning a non-Christian, or ancient song.

^d Peter suggested that, although the people believed this, perhaps some of the friends of the man untied him, or even sleight of hand might have been resorted to by those officiating in the ceremony.

^e Medicine-man or angakok.

^f It is possible that this may have been done at various times as well as directly following this ceremony. The exact sequence and connection of the various ceremonies, in which the angakok participated after his initiation, are not well understood by the author.

in which all would join. While they did this, the angakok would "act wild," and "eat the fire" from the wicks and lamps. In this way he would put out all the lights.

Eating the liver of the Angakok.—When a man was "made" an angakok, the "old fellow" would come to him with a knife like a cheese-cutter's knife, and try to kill him. The angakok would try to elude him. If the "old fellow" killed him, he cut out his liver and ate it. Both the "old fellow" and the angakok possessed the power to "go right through" the side or roof of the house where there was no door or other opening, so that the chase was a lively one. The angakok often escaped, but sometimes he was caught, and the "old fellow" feasted on his liver.

Teachings of the Angakok.—The angakok was supposed to tell the people what they should do, and they sometimes met to ask him.^a

On such occasions all would go into one house; as soon as they were all in, the lights would be put out. When all was dark inside the house, they all sang heathen songs "on the old fellow's side." Then the angakok "would make all kinds of noise." While this went on the people asked him what they should do. Then he would call on one of the "bad ones to tell him," and then he would tell the people what the "black one" told him to tell them.

Sometimes he would tell the married men that they should change wives for a time.^b

Sometimes when there was only one or two of his friends near, the angakok would "have fun." He would box, wrestle, and talk with them.

Diet regulation by the Angakok.—The angakok ordered that when a seal was killed, the men eat certain portions and the women certain other portions. The fore legs^c "had to be" eaten by the men only, and the lower part had^d to be eaten by the women only. The men had to eat the "hind legs," and the men and boys the head. The heart belonged to the women, and the men were to have none of it. If the men ate any of the heart, and then ate any plant, berries, or fruit, they would be poisoned and die.

They were also told that after eating a fish or a seal they must not eat any fruit or plant, and that if they did, it would poison them. There were both black and red berries, and they were commanded that the men only should eat the red berries, and that the black berries were only for the women.

^a Peter said, "Just as we now learn what to do from the Bible."

^b In Boas's "Central Eskimo," p. 593, among the commands issued by the angakok, as to the manner of atonement, is mentioned an "exchange of wives between two men." Peter said, "That is not the way now."

^c Peter touched his forearm.

^d Peter touched his upper arm.

When a "lot of men" go hunting walrus, the game is divided among their households. The first one to spear the walrus has one of his "ivories," the second gets the other, and each one that spears it gets a special piece of the meat, but all that go hunting get a part. When a man gets an "ivory," he uses it to make a "good dart" or harpoon.*

The "heathen" Eskimo have one name, while those who have become Christianized, or who have been long in contact with European influence, have two or more. That Peter was correct in this, so far as the individuals at the village were concerned, was apparent on studying their names. One little fellow born at the exposition was named Christopher Columbus William Polisher.

The influence of mission teachings on the names is very great, many from the Bible being used, as in the name of one of Peter's household: Mary Magdalene Polisher.

According to Georgie Deer, at Rigoulette, seal-skin clothes are no longer in use, the people dressing in garments of the ordinary civilized pattern, made of cloth bought from the Hudson Bay Company. The men, however, have their hair seal-skin coats and breeches, which they use only when fishing in bad weather.

In regard to methods of hunting and fishing, Georgie said that when a seal is caught, the skin is cut around the body, and pulled off at each end without splitting it. Then they cut around the skin, until a long line is produced. When a man goes to hunt seal at holes in the ice, his wife accompanies him, to hold the line that is attached to his spear. They cut a notch in the ice, and, taking a bone lever which has been sharpened at one end, she holds it vertically and so that the sharp end is pressed hard down into this notch. The line then being fastened to the bone, close to the ice, is easily held by her, even when a very large seal is speared. Perhaps it was from the Europeans of the trading posts that the Eskimo children learned to play with dolls; at any rate, Georgie's babies took as much comfort with their rag dolls as could any child with one of the most exquisite manufacture.

Georgie had heard of various tribes living inland on this side of his home. One of these tribes, the "Nascapee" or "Nasquapee" Indians, live in what he called the Mingan country. They wear a long snowshoe, while the Indians near his home at Rigoulette wear round snowshoes. They live by hunting deer, for which they use little hunting dogs. These people are very particular that their dogs do not eat certain parts of the bones of the deer and other animals. They believe that if the dog eats such parts of the bones or certain parts of the meat, they would have bad luck. When they kill any otter, they

* Several of the Eskimo drew pictures of harpoons, etc., but none of these exhibited much artistic skill. However, a specimen of penmanship (No. 350) was secured from one of Peter's household, which, considering advantages and environments, was surprisingly good.

hang the feet up to a tree for good luck. They believe a partridge must be picked while warm and hung to the belt by the wing as soon as killed, or they would be unlucky.

On killing a porcupine, they tie a string to one fore and one hind foot, and so carry it home on their back. As soon as they get home, the women sharpen a stick and put it through up to the nose, then they blow up the animal with wind, singe the hair off, and hang him up over the fire so that he will turn round and round until cooked. Then, for good luck, they hang up a "green brush" in the same way and leave it until all the "green things" are burned off by the fire.