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The Gestalt of Plenty

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Covenant1

Culture may be defined as a dynamic system of human communication which governs interactions between people and their environment which are in turn dependent on and influenced by that environment. Rooted in the physical environment is the symbiotic relationship between humanity, its cultures and economies and nature, her diversity and resources. Life is ordered by traditional beliefs that articulate a conceptual environment giving structure and predictability to the physical environment in which social and cultural development is identified within the rhythms and productivity of nature.

However, humans inhabit two seemingly non-communicating worlds, the empirical and the conceptual. Myth, ritual and taboo characterize the conceptual environment, tying it to the physical world and identifying humans' relation to their specific ecosystem. Yet, it is the dialectic created by these twin streams of physical and metaphysical that weave a cybernetic pattern of self-regulation and self-maintenance.

But, what has all this got to do with eating?

Joseph Campbell writes "early societies learned that the essence of life is that it lives by killing and eating; that's the great mystery that the myths have to deal with. The hunt became a ritual of sacrifice, and the hunters in turn performed acts of atonement to the departed spirits of the animals, hoping to coax them into being sacrificed again."² It is in killing and eating that an active paradigm originates which reinforces humans' relationship to one another and to their land.

The gestalt of plenty.

Kiviaktitaktok. Inuit hunting beluga and apportioning it throughout the community, each according to his needs. Zabijacka. Czechs slaughtering the family pig and all sharing in the feast. I went on my first beluga hunt when I was in mother's amautiq.³

In the season of upingoa, when the sea-ice retreats, in the Inuit Hamlet of Pangnirtung, in Canada's Eastern Arctic, men hunt beluga for muktuk, a thin

layer of fat which lies between a whale's blubber and its meat. Women slaughter the animal, stripping its hide in such a way that it can be used to make a plethora of useful items from floats to dogsled traces. A mother cups the blood in her hands so her son might drink and the life of the whale becomes the life of the man.

Seven Inuit stand at Pangnirtung's airport terminal awaiting permission to board. They each carry a green garbage bag half full of muktuk. They are travelling to other remote communities to deliver their special cargo to relatives forced to move in search of work. Intersetlement trade in beluga parts is illegal. But, the RCMP constable who has lived in the community for years doesn't say anything because he knows that the natural lives and habits of the people make them happy.

Taleelayooq, Inuit progenitress of marine mammals sends the soul of the beluga to the Inuit and receives it back in her underwater abode for that which comes from the sea must be returned to the sea. Beluga bones and scraps are thrown into the sea to be washed away with the tides.

Yet, according to Canadian government researchers, nutritionally Inuit food needs may be met by consuming domesticated meats such as beef and chicken flown in from the south. And in the wake of the frozen burgers and soft drinks for sale at the local Hudson Bay Company store comes a decline in the use of country meats characterized by a nutritional erosion evident in anemia in women and children, increased dental disease and cardiovascular disorders.⁴ Increased restrictions on marine mammal hunting affect the community's cultural and physical health.

I dreamed of a golden pig and presents for my brothers and sisters.⁵

At the time of the harvest moon Czech families re-unite in their villages for Zabijacka. Special recipes, spices and cereals grown for this occasion cover the kitchen table and counter. The family pig is washed and slaughtered. Blood soup, jelito, is made immediately to sustain the laborers throughout the day's hard work of slaughtering and preserving the pig.

Choice parts are preserved to celebrate the birth of Christ. Special tidbits are set aside for the animals that live in the house, cats and dogs. At the day's end, jitrnice, intestines stuffed with blood products, are carried away to friends and family who couldn't return to the village because of work commitments. Lastly, at sunset, blood and bone are buried in the garden for that which comes from the land must be returned to the land.

Habits developed over the past forty years, from state ownership of land to state-run kitchens, has meant the common dining hall in which Czechs were, and in most cases, continue to be fed, at work and at school, has simplified cuisine. Meals have lost an important social and cultural function through the

introduction of common boarding and common canteens. Quality has been given over to quantity so that meals which were simple to prepare continue to be given priority and portions simply made larger. The Czech food pyramid is heavily influenced by the price of food, not only the health associated with eating certain foods.⁶

The continuing institutionalization of meals begun under the communist regime means that the same menu and the same smell and the same taste routinize instead of ritualize the meal. But, at autumn's end the communists were like everyone else, returning to their village and their families to eat jelita and jitrinice.⁷

Amidst the state-run factory farms and anti-whaling campaigns the central theme continues, a covenant between god and goddess, humanity and land; shared generosity throughout hamlets and villages, families and friends; thanks proffered to land and the sea; blood of whale, blood of pig, blood of man. To sup on the blood of the whale and the pig is to live within the promise of plenty.

Notes

1 For the purposes of this narrative, covenant should be interpreted as having the spiritual sense of a mutual agreement either to do or to forbear something.

2 Campbell, J. with B. Moyers. 1988. *The Power of Myth*. Edited by B.S. Flowers. Toronto: Doubleday.

3 personal communication, Hunter F, field notes 1990.

4 International Whaling Commission Annual Report, 1986.

5 personal communication, Subject D, field notes 1994.

6 personal communication, Tomas Zidek, 1996.

7 personal communication, Subject H, 1996.

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