Pathways

INUIT ELDRERS OFTEN SPOKE of the many pathways that crisscrossed the Inuit world, both physical and spiritual. Places of power and objects of veneration all have a path— an angayuk—that leads to and from them. Some of these paths are for travellers, others only for shamans who could, say, help the Inuit, utter words to attract animals, move stones, calm storms and raise the dead. Still others are invisible, leading to places of power and within places of power.

Pathways allow one to traverse the physical and metaphysical landscape with a sense of direction. Knowledge of them is a connection to the past as well as a guide to the future. They can be earthly routes or metaphors.

The habitual routes of all living creatures are their pathways. At some religious sites there exists a path known as apsakpiq. Only by leaving one’s footsteps on these paths can one evoke the spiritual powers latent in such places. The clouds and the movement of the sun, moon and stars follow an apsakpiq. And there are pathways of the mind that can lead to wisdom or end in disarray.

Awareness of such routes can be used to intercept the paths of migrating birds or to avoid the consequences of repercussions of treading upon places of spiritual significance.

THE INUKSUKTUQ ARE among the most important objects found along the ancient pathways. Each inukshuk (the singular of inukshuk) is as unique as the person who created it. There is a place on southwestern Baffin Island called Inukshuklaiv where there are approximately 100 novel inukshuk within a few hectares. While it is a mystery as to why there is such a concentration on the site, it is one of the most venerated places for the Inuit.

Inukshuk with a spiritual dimension imply an object acting in the capacity of an inuk— a human being. These are the message centres that tell of such things as dangerous places, the depth of snow, the direction of the mainland from an island, or where seals and fish can be taken. These stone figures were once an integral part of the life support system of the Inuit.

There are also inukshuk-like figures that signify places of human remains, where spirits reside, where one must not trespass, where shamans were initiated, where trials were once held, and more. Their location was often carefully planned — some to be visible from a great distance, others to be hidden from coastal view; some to be apparent against a snowy backdrop, others to be veiled from the sea. Still others were built simply to be in the likeness of a person.

It is common to find small pieces of stone tucked into the crevice of an inukshuk, left by travellers over the generations. By doing this, visitors have shown respect for the object and attached to it a small piece of themselves.

The ancient inukshuk at Inukshuklaiv, southwest Baffin Island

Suglaq, southwest coast of Baffin Island

PLACES OF POWER include sites that can be life-threatening. The qutaq (spearing island), known for fierce storms, vicious tides, dangerous ice and other hazards, are places where the chances of losing one’s life is greatest.

The flat lands at Suglaq, along the southwest coast of Baffin Island, sit a few metres above sea level. Travellers may see the water rising in the distance, calculate that they have plenty of time to leave, and then be swept away by tides as high as 10 metres. Sometimes the danger comes from what cannot be seen.

The topography can be so deceptive that even seasoned travellers have lost their way and perished. There is a | niny place on Kingisipeak Island where changing light and shadow can alter the landscape and maroon even the most experienced traveller.

Some places are avoided because of their association with terrible events, such as murder, pestilence or starvation. These include shipwreck spots — where humans are known to have been devoured. And the memory of death still lingers in Nuanneqik on northern Baffin Island, a place where many people died suddenly, probably from disease brought by whales. It is a place avoided to this day.

It is not considered shameful to be fearful of such places and things. To be fearful is to be prudent and to be prudent is to improve one’s chances of success while diminishing the possibility of disaster. It is considered just as prudent to know how to interpret meteorological data as it is to know how to pronounce the words of a magical incantation to calm a storm.
Where strict customs were observed

The expression allirnaaq refers to the many sacred places where one followed customs closely. These range from the feared Anguwhjaarvik, where shamans were initiated, to places of incredible beauty and tranquillity called uluakkrutimok.

I arrived at the tunillarvik on Arviujaq (Sentry Island), N.W.T., unknowing. All I saw was a clear space with a scattering of a few boulders. Once explained, however, the randomness disappeared and in its place emerged a formal setting with the objects of reverence clearly visible.

Two large boulders marked the extremely important Kaasq. This is the entrance to the allirnaaq, a place where strict customs must be followed if one is to benefit from the power available here. The kaasq prescribes the path one must follow to reach the heart of a sacred place. Once I had taken the path and stood in the centre of the site, I could see the objects and how they related to one another, working together to create a whole. This was where one left gifts in the hopes of receiving favours such as safety when embarking on a long journey. The name of the place, its central object, and what occurred there in the past are all related to the act of giving and receiving favours.

In ancient times, customs were also carefully observed at places where the transactions of life and death occurred, such as hauling-out beaches for walruses and whales and at prized fishing locations. Among the most significant were those where life was renewed — fish spawning beds, caribou calving grounds, bird nesting sites and, most importantly, the nalliluit — caribou crossings where ceremonies were held to prepare the site for the return of the life-sustaining caribou.

These things I have recounted were given to me by elders who once lived in the traditional way. Those times are gone but it has been my great fortune to have had the elders share their perceptions, words and expressions, now seldom used and in some cases no longer understood.

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