

Module 2

People of the Forest

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Course objectives

The objective of this module is to examine the traditional economies of the indigenous peoples living in the forest zone. The livelihoods that will be discussed are: hunting, fishing, gathering and small-scale herding prior to large-scale herding. The latter will be the main topic of module 4. A number of parallels can be drawn between the lives of the indigenous peoples of the forest zone of Russia and those inhabiting the North American subarctic. Reindeer herding was – and in some cases still is – a central activity throughout the European boreal forest and especially the Russian taiga zone and in north Scandinavia. The lives and traditions of reindeer herders, however, will be discussed in greater detail in Module 4 whereas the focus in this module is on other subsistence activities such as hunting and gathering (foraging) that allowed human survival in the subarctic boreal forest.

Although there is a great deal of linguistic and cultural variation in this part of the world, there are nonetheless many similarities from Alaska to the Russian Far East, such as technologies and subsistence activities. This module begins however, with a brief review of those features that define the subarctic: its forests and its landscape.

Upon completion of this module you should be able to

1. describe the traditional livelihood of the boreal forest zone;
2. analyze the complexity of the use of local resources;
3. compare changes across different states and regions and analyze why and how these changes have taken place.

Introduction

The indigenous peoples living in the subarctic forest zone maintain a strong connection to their environment through hunting, fishing and gathering renewable resources such as living terrestrial, marine and freshwater resources. Although temperatures are less extreme than in the tundra zone, agriculture is rarely practiced throughout this region, simply because the growing season for crops is too short and the poor condition of the soil cannot maintain biodiversity and productivity. The exception is Scandinavia where many of the Sami inhabiting this zone have been practising agriculture since the late Middle Ages. The traditional livelihood practices – often developed over thousands of years – provide hunters and fishers the essential basis for food production and their way of life. However, the inhabitants of this region – from the Cree of Quebec to the Sami population in northwest Russia – all have in common that their livelihood is threatened by, not only changing ecological conditions due to climate change, but also by a growing encroachment on their lands by southern industrial societies in search of natural resources.¹ Flooding caused by the construction of dams, mining, forestry activities, and demographic changes all represent a threat to hunting, herding, and fishing (Freeman 2000:xiv). Furthermore, social and economic changes have an impact on traditional livelihood among indigenous societies, often related to the activities of outsiders. Access to natural resources is obviously essential, but it is also important that the resources hunters, gatherers, and fishers depend on, are safe and not contaminated, whether by local production activities or by chemicals used in production processes far away. Finally, hunting and trapping related activities are seriously undermined by trade barriers and animal-rights campaigns.

¹ Some even argue that the *taste* of the meat is different due to the contemporary environmental changes (ACIA 2007:11).

Before identifying the boreal forest zone and a group of peoples living in this region, the next section discusses a livelihood based on foraging (hunting and gathering). Because of space constraints it is unfortunately not possible to provide a circumpolar-wide-coverage of all the indigenous people living in the boreal forest and to describe their way of life in detail. Therefore we focus in this module mainly on the First Nations people of the Canadian subarctic. These people, their social activities, threats and livelihood, however, are illustrative of the common cultural affinities and challenges faced by other indigenous peoples living in the boreal forest zone.

Foraging: hunting and gathering

Indigenous societies have subsisted on hunting, trapping and gathering for thousands of years to provide food for the table of the hunter and his family, but also for clothing and other materials such as for the construction of houses. Indigenous societies depend on locally harvested food, such as meat, berries, edible plants and fish, for their traditional diet and – more recently – as a supplement to imported food available in the food stores. In order to be able to buy this food and necessary equipment, hunting and gathering becomes also important as a cash-generating economic activity.

Often a combination of traditional techniques was – and still is – used to harvest and process the hunted animals. Flexibility from the hunter's perspective in terms of living conditions, eating habits etc. was necessary because most animals were only available on specific locations during specific seasons of the year. Caribou, for instance, are generally hunted in the fall when they migrate southwards from the tundra to the boreal forest. Trapping is generally a winter activity; spring and summer the time for gathering whereas fishing usually is done when the ice breaks up in April and throughout the summer. Therefore, hunters and their families lived a half-nomadic existence moving from their trap lines to their hunting ranges and to their fish camps rather than staying in one settlement, and often used a combination of trapping, fishing, hunting, and other traditional activities to ensure availability of resources year-round, and ultimately the survival of their traditional livelihood. Besides being of economic and dietary importance, hunting and gathering are important from a social and cultural point of view. A young man's first catch, for example, was celebrated by the whole

community who shared the harvest according to well-established patterns, often based on kinship ties (ACIA 2007:11).

Thus, hunting was and is much more than just shooting ducks. Animals are not regarded as commodities and hunting was conducted with respect for the animal. Hunting contributes to the well-being of indigenous people because it is related to many social activities. Knowledge of their environment – including its animals and ecosystems – is essential for successful harvesting. Because such practices have been conducted for so many generations, hunters have detailed knowledge about the natural world and its complexities (Nuttall 1998). Hunt and prey were chosen selectively: hunting different species at different times. Not only to hunt more efficiently, but also to prevent over-harvesting of a particular species. As such, in some cases, hunting becomes resource management, rather than the taking of animals for economic purposes. Hunting is often conducted under the supervision of an experienced elder hunter who knows the land. He – since hunting was mainly considered to be an activity for males – would also be the one to decide whether the prey in question could be taken or whether it needed to be left to grow and reproduce to be hunted in the future.

Like hunting, trapping is a seasonal-activity. Trapping is often conducted during winter times and provides the trappers with meat and pelts, often from small terrestrial species such as the beaver. Indigenous people argue that trapping and hunting of animals is necessary to avoid the population of a particular species growing to levels that exceed the carrying capacity of the environment (overpopulation).

The Cree hunters are a good example of First Nations people living in the subarctic boreal forest zone. They live in Canada, more precisely in the area east and south of James Bay and the southern part of Hudson Bay and are famous for their efforts to stop hydroelectric projects on their traditional homelands. Felt (in Freeman 2000:39-57) provides a detailed description of their way of life. Hunting and trapping remains important for indigenous people even in modern times and not only in the forest zone. One-quarter of the Cree population in 2000 was still considered to be hunting full-time (Felt in Freeman 2000:50).

Identifying the Boreal Forest

The boreal forest (or taiga) was formed with the retreat of the continental and alpine glaciers that had covered most of the northern hemisphere. As the ice melted, plant and animal species spread into new zones. The migration of species was also facilitated by low ocean levels between the Americas and north-eastern Russia, and between continental Europe to northern Scotland, where the boreal forest established itself in the highlands. Today, a small isolated boreal forest remains there, forested with Scotch pine.

The forest composition will vary depending on two factors: soil temperature and moisture. The boreal forest occupies those lands characterized by cold winters, short but hot summers, and relatively poor soils. In Europe, the boreal forest is found in the high northern latitudes (northern Scotland, Sweden, Norway, and Finland) because of the mitigating influence of the Gulf Stream, which pushes warm air far into the northern part of the European continent. East of the Ural Mountains, in a region ringed by high mountain chains, the boreal forest extends as far south as China and Mongolia. In the western part of North America, however, warm Pacific currents push the boreal forest further north. Sub polar rainforest predominates in coastal Alaska and British Columbia, where humid and warm air and generally milder conditions do not favour the boreal forest. Likewise, warm Pacific air along the coast of the Russian Far East makes for a much milder climate and the growth of more temperate forests in this region. In eastern North America, the flow of Arctic air southwards pushed the boreal forest into Ontario and Quebec, where it eventually gives way to temperate deciduous forests.

To the north, the boreal forest gives way to open patches of tundra, where trees – except the odd dwarf specimen – cannot survive due to permanently frozen soil. The tundra region will be discussed in module four. The boreal forest is a zone dominated by coniferous trees that grow best in acidic soil. Other forest species are black spruce (*Picea mariana*) in North America and larches (*Larix*) in Siberia and the Russian Far East. Additionally in boreal climates such coniferous trees as spruce (*Picea*), tamarack (*Larix laricina*), balsam and Siberian Fir (*Abies sibirica*), and deciduous trees as birch (*Betula*) can be found. The subarctic boreal forest is also characterized by a variety of small plants, including many kinds of berries.

The mammals that are most representative of the boreal forest are caribou – or reindeer, moose – its main predator the wolf – bear, beaver, porcupine, otter, lynx, wolverine and mink. With the exception of the Scottish forests, moose are found throughout the boreal forests, ranging from Scandinavia across Russia and Northern America. Reindeer (*Rangifer tarandus*) are an important seasonal inhabitant of the boreal forest as are their North American relatives, migratory caribou (see module 4). In all locales, reindeer and caribou migrate over great distances from their summer calving grounds to their winter forest-tundra or lichen woodland pastures located in the northern fringes of the boreal forest, or taiga zone. Reindeer and caribou graze primarily on lichens – a symbiotic association of fungus and algae – that do not require soil for their survival and are spread by airborne spores. Birds that can be found are mostly ravens, blue jays, snowy owls and ptarmigan – who all remain in the region throughout the winter. Migrating birds include geese, many species of duck and countless songbirds. The species of fish available in the lakes and rivers of the boreal forest are trout, whitefish, char, northern pike, and – closer to the coast – salmon.

Human survival in the boreal forest has followed two general patterns. As will be discussed later in this module, one lifeway that emerged is based on foraging (hunting and gathering), with small bands occupying large territories. Traditional livelihood consists of hunting reindeer, moose and other animals in the boreal forest, as well as fishing and gathering various berries and plant species. Another widespread subsistence strategy among the indigenous populations of northern Europe and the Russian Far East is reindeer herding (see module 4). Herding is a successful strategy, especially combined with the hunting of caribou (wild reindeer) and a variety of other animal species. Reindeer herding spread across the north and pushed as far south as northern China. Successful reindeer herding requires that human communities protect the reindeer from parasites such as mosquitoes and parasite flies, either by migrating with the reindeer to the tundra or mountain valleys where cooler temperatures limit the spread of parasites, or – in the boreal forest or taiga zone – through the use of smudge fires to drive away parasites with smoke.

Life in the Canadian forest zone

Though most of the material in this section focuses on the Canadian subarctic², a lot of what is described here is also true for that part of the Alaska Plateau region that has a subarctic continental (boreal forest) climate and in pre-contact times was inhabited by Athapaskan speakers, the Dene.³ The peoples of the Canadian Shield subarctic shared similar environments. They spoke a variety of languages that can be grouped into two main language families: Dene (or Athapaskan) and the Algonquian. As was the case throughout the subarctic, the Dene were primarily hunters, although fishing was an important secondary activity.

A subsistence-economy based on traditional livelihood required great mobility over the territory. Different resources were exploited at different times of the year, and survival depended on a number of big-game species. Life was regulated by the seasons and the indigenous inhabitants of the boreal forest structured their lives over the course of a yearly cycle. This section tells the story of the traditional livelihood that was widespread throughout the Northern American subarctic stretching from Alaska to Newfoundland.

Spring

The spring breakup – along with the autumn freeze-up – was a difficult period during which mobility was greatly reduced. The ice that covered rivers, lakes, and ponds was ‘rotten’, which is to say the ice would thin in unpredictable ways and it was too great a risk to venture onto the ice. Likewise, the thick layers of powdery snow in the forest began to melt, leaving granular and water-soaked snow that was not suitable for snowshoes and toboggans.

With the arrival of spring, a number of birds returned to the region, to mate or to nest in the rich wetlands of the subarctic, or as a stopover on a much longer migration to the Arctic. The migratory birds that returned to the North American subarctic in the spring included a wide variety of ducks, geese, swans, and other migratory species of birds. These migratory birds were especially important as a food source during the spring breakup, when it was difficult for

² This module’s description of life in the subarctic draws heavily upon *Subarctic*, Volume 6 of the *Handbook of North American Indians* and published by the Smithsonian Institute in 1981. This volume gathered the leading researchers and scholars and provides a comprehensive account of the ethnography and history of the subarctic.

³ A number of ethnographic terms were used to name the indigenous Athapaskan speakers. However, the term that is most commonly used by these populations to name their people is ‘Dene’ which signifies ‘people’.

people to hunt big game – such as moose and caribou – and near impossible to fish on the ‘rotten’ ice.

Overland travel was difficult, so families moved using the waterways when snow and ice disappeared, families began moving by canoe to areas where fishing was better. The indigenous peoples of the subarctic had mastered the fabrication of birch bark canoes, an efficient means of transportation because the canoes were resilient, light, and easily repaired. Using canoes, they were not only able to travel long distances over the terrain, they could also capitalize on the abundance of fish in the rivers. Fish weirs and traps, along with gill nets woven from the inner bark of willow trees, were used to catch fish. In April and May, families busied themselves building and repairing canoes, nets, and other tools required for the community’s success in the coming summer season of fishing, hunting, and gathering.

Canoes were built in the spring, while the bark of the birch tree was easily detached in large sheets of flexible, yet strong construction material. In a few areas where birch bark was not readily available, spruce bark was used as a substitute. The birch (or spruce) bark was sewn into a canoe frame made of cedar or fir, using the split roots of black spruce. The seams were sealed using black spruce gum. The final product was sturdy enough to carry families and their belongings and yet light enough to be portaged from one body of water to the next (Rogers and Smith 1981:138).

Bark was also a commonly used material in making a number of containers and cooking implements. Birch bark pots were used in cooking prior to the introduction through trade of metal pots and pans. Though birch bark pots could not have been placed on cooking fires, water in a birch bark pot was brought to boil by dropping red-hot stones into the container. This permitted the cooking of meat while not wasting the nutritious juices and fat that would have dripped into a fire if the meat had been ‘barbecued’ over an open fire. The versatility of birch bark is demonstrated by its widespread use throughout the north both in North America and northern Russia.

Summer

In the subarctic, virtually every family moved to fish camps on the main rivers and tributaries in the summer. An important summer activity was fishing in the open water. The installation of traps and weirs was a group enterprise under the direction of a leader who had achieved

status and authority. In addition to these traps, a variety of other techniques were used to catch fish, including dragging nets from canoes or from platforms along the shoreline. Much of the summer was devoted to fishing, cutting, and sun-drying or smoke-drying fish for the coming winter. In the boreal forest, a number of species were fished, including whitefish, sucker, grayling, and pike. Whitefish were an important source of food for those people living deeper in the boreal forest. This species of fish spawns in the fall and moves into shallow waters close to a shore or upstream, and was taken using dip nets and weirs. Several families congregated in summer camps along the Mackenzie River and its tributaries.

During those months when fish were abundant, populations were relatively sedentary. Living on the shore offered some respite from the swarms of blackflies and mosquitoes, as breezes would repel biting insects. Summer housing varied, but there were consistent patterns across the subarctic. Summer homes were made of items that could be easily located or transported. These included conical lodges with a framework of light poles, covered by hides, boughs, bark, or rush mats. In the eastern subarctic, dome-shaped lodges were common; light poles were driven into the ground, bent forward, and tied together to create a dome framework that could then be covered with hides, boughs, or barks. Smaller versions were used as sweat lodges. Another variation that was equally common in the eastern subarctic was a ridgepole lodge: a central horizontal pole supported by two A-shaped frames, all covered with hides or bark. At the centre of the lodges would have been a fire and a hearth. Generally, a lodge housed a family, but larger lodges housed a number of families. Larger ridgepole lodges featured a number of fires and an entrance at either end. On short hunting or travelling expeditions, a variety of temporary shelters were built, including lean-tos (Rogers and Smith 1981:138).

The summer season also provided a number of edible plant foods, such as blueberries, lowbush cranberries, and rosehips. The berries were placed in birch bark baskets and stored in pits dug into the ground. Though plant products did not provide a significant part of the diet, they were an important supplement. In the west, lichens (genus *Gyrophora*) were often made into a nourishing soup when other foods were in short supply. In southern transitional zones, wild rice and maple sap were gathered seasonally. Plants also figured prominently as traditional medicines.

Autumn and winter

Around mid-September, families left the rivers and lakes for the autumn camps. Those who lived close to the migration routes of the caribou set out to intercept the herds as they moved from the tundra to the treeline. Caribou were to be hunted in autumn. Not only were the caribou hides at their best in the autumn, but the caribou were also at their fattest. A common method used to hunt the migrating caribou included the 'chute and pound'. The pound consisted of a circular enclosure of mazes of brush hedges and snares tied to poles or tree stumps. The chutes were two diverging wings that would caribou to the pound. The chutes comprised of brush, poles, or other decoys representing humans set at a distance of 10-20 metres from each other. Wishing to avoid hunters, caribou moved away from these decoys and were thus herded into a progressively tighter and tighter chute and eventually to the opening of the pound where they could be easily killed by waiting hunters. In other locations, caribou were hunted from canoes as they crossed rivers and streams (Rogers and Smith 1981:131-132).

The fall caribou hunt provided valuable hides and meat. This is significant, given the great reliance on meat. Fat is rich in calories, and it provides many essential nutrients, such as fatty acids, that are essential to a balanced diet. Any surplus of meat was stored for winter use. Caribou flesh was dried – as was fish – and then pounded to powder and mixed with fat to make pemmican. The pemmican was stored in various containers, notably hide bags or birch bark boxes. These stores could be kept on cache racks out of the reach of bears and other carnivores (Rogers and Smith 1981:135). Besides caribou, a variety of animals were hunted: hares, porcupine, spruce goose, and smaller species, and, in some regions, woodland bison. Bears were occasionally hunted, as they were prized for their fat. In the North American subarctic, bears were trapped and killed in deadfalls and snares or simply killed with spears and arrows. In the fall they could be hunted in rich berry patches, where bears would come to fatten before hibernating. Hunting dogs helped to locate bear dens. However, bears were not hunted on a regular basis, as they were generally objects of respect among many of the peoples of the Canadian subarctic. This parallels the importance of the bear in the Russian North: the Khanty and the Mansi peoples, for example, conducted an annual bear festival with the ritualized killing of a bear.

During the early months of winter, hunting, fishing, and trapping continued. People fished through the ice, using spears, lures, hooks, and nets. The Metis, for example, used pots and

holes cut into the ice to drag nets under the ice. This technique was quite widespread. There are descriptions dating back to the 1770s among the Dene, describing similar fishing techniques. Having cleared the ice of snow using a scoop, an ice chisel tipped with horn was used to bore holes through the ice and gill nets made of willow bast or babiche were threaded under the ice, using a pole and a forked stick. Fishing continued until the ice became too thick and the fish had left for deeper waters (Rogers and Smith 1981:136).

In the late fall, families returned to their winter camps. The winter dwellings tended to be more substantial. These were usually turf-covered and sometimes semi-subterranean structures. In some subarctic regions, solid-walled conical wooden lodges were built. The Dene of Northern Alberta, British Columbia and the territories (the Slavey Dene) had a summer dwelling, which consisted of a conical structure covered with bark, or moose hide. Their winter shelter resembled a low, oblong, log cabin with a pitched roof, covered with mud and clay. This structure had two doorways, and the fire was placed in the centre, with a hole in the roof letting the smoke escape (Rogers and Smith 1981:140).

Quality clothing is essential for survival in severe subarctic climates, as it was for subsistence activities, such as hunting big game. Generally, it was the women who prepared clothing from hides. Hides were cleaned and scraped. Most caribou and moose hides were dehaired. Hides were tanned by soaking, scraping, rubbing with brains and grease, and finally by smoking over a fire. The resulting hides would remain supple and could then be cut and sewn into clothing, such as shirts, loincloths, dresses, coats, and parkas. In the eastern Canadian subarctic, a beaver fur cloak was worn over other clothing for warmth, along with a fur hat. To the west, fur coats or parkas were made of caribou or moose hides for extra warmth. Throughout the North American boreal forests, moccasins and leggings were worn: a sock of hare-skin or grass kept feet warm in the moccasins. Clothing was decorated with paint or porcupine quills. With the onset of the fur trade, decorative beads were integrated into indigenous decorative techniques to produce elaborately decorated clothing and moccasins.

In January and February, when food reserves were at their lowest levels, hunting parties went on extended trips. Hunters moved through the forest on snowshoes. These finely made devices consisted of a wooden frame (usually birch), laced with a webbing of woven babiche. Snowshoe styles varied greatly: to the west, snowshoes tended to be long and narrow; while in the east, they tended to be oval in shape. Different types of snowshoes were used according

to purpose: the Dene used a narrow snowshoe for breaking and following trails and a wider, longer snowshoe for tracking big-game animals. The weight of a hunter was distributed over the surface area of the snowshoes, and this permitted movement over the surface of light powdery snow. In the late winter, moose (or depending on availability, caribou) were driven into deep snow, where they could not run away from hunters on snowshoes, who speared these large animals floundering in the thick snow (Rogers and Smith 1981:138).

In addition to snowshoes, toboggans were used to transport goods over the snow. A toboggan consists of two thin boards secured in place by crossbars. The boards were curved upwards at the front of the toboggan to ensure that the toboggan would not dig into the snow as it was pulled. Like the snowshoe, the toboggan distributed weight over a large surface area, ensuring that it would not sink into the snow. Toboggans in the subarctic were rarely tied to sled dogs because they were generally too small and the snow too loose and thick for dogs to effectively pull a loaded toboggan.

Beaver was an important food source in the eastern subarctic. It not only provided meat, but also a rich fur pelt. This large rodent reproduces quickly and can easily be located by finding its dam. When its ponds were frozen, the beaver's passageways were blocked. Hunters broke into the lodge, and the beaver had no easy escape. The indigenous peoples of the subarctic trapped small animals too. A variety of snares were used, including the tossing-pole, spring-pole, and stationary snares (see Rogers and Smith 1981:134). Deadfalls of various sizes were used to hunt a variety of species, including bears as noted. Snares were effective in hunting hare – an important source of meat when big game failed.

Social organization

The social organization of the peoples of the Canadian subarctic is characterized by mobility, individual autonomy, and reciprocity. Regional groups or bands assembled for seasonal hunting and summer fishing but dispersed into smaller units for most of the year, particularly in the winter. Bands were neither centralized nor tightly defined. They were not corporate groups with shifting allegiances over generations, changing the composition of the group. Each band had a territory that provided all of the resources the group needed to survive; but the territories often overlapped, and neighbouring groups did not contest the use of their territories in times of need.

In the subarctic, regional bands varied in size from 200 to 400 people. Environmental conditions rarely allowed the entire band to gather for extended periods in one location. Rather, the larger band spread over the larger territory. These smaller groups – hunting groups, or local bands – comprised a few nuclear families related through primary ties of kinship and marriage: a father and sons, brothers, and brothers-in-law and their families. Nuclear families rarely operated as an independent unit, since a larger grouping was required to provide the necessary labour to ensure the survival of the group. The kinship system of most subarctic peoples was bilateral, with individuals recognizing relatives from both the father's and the mother's kin group. An individual's kindred – all of those individuals considered to be related – provided a flexible group of individuals that could be called upon for assistance (Rogers and Smith 1981:141-144).

In general, there was division of labour determined by sex: men hunted and made the weapons, snowshoes, sleds, boats, and other instruments they needed for the hunt; and women, among their other tasks, helped to build shelters, butchered and distributed the animals hunted, prepared hides, sewed clothing, gathered a variety of plants and berries, trapped small mammals, fished, and dried and smoked meat and fish. Both men and women hauled loads: in the winter, pulling toboggans, and in the summer, hauling packs fixed with a tumpline that went around the head (Smith 1981:271-284).

There was a strict egalitarian ethos among the peoples of the Canadian boreal forest. Important group decisions were based on consensus, with the entire group coming to a decision. Individuals could achieve leadership based on skills, demonstrated wisdom or possession of supernatural powers, but the leader was merely the first among equals, as authority could not be imposed. Social control was maintained through gossip, fear of supernatural sanctions, the need for cooperation, and the necessity to share material goods. Generosity, sharing, and hospitality were valued and important. A successful hunter, for example, was expected to share his game (Rogers and Smith 1981:144).

Religion and spiritual beliefs

The traditional religious and spiritual beliefs of the indigenous peoples of the Canadian subarctic could be characterized as animism: the belief in spirits that inhabit all living things as well as objects and forces. The Cree, for example, called the spirits manitous. These manitous could appear in dreams and grant special powers or protections to an individual.

There are historical references to the existence of a Great-Great Spirit, or Kitchi-Kitchi-Manitou, to whom a dog was sacrificed on rare occasion. There is also reference to a Great Spirit (misi-manito), but there is debate as to whether this was a traditional belief or one introduced by the arrival of Christian missionaries (Smith 1981:263).

Survival depended upon eating other souls or spirits. To ensure future survival, it was necessary to respect the animals that were sacrificing themselves to give life to humans. Demonstrating reverence for the animal spirits was central to the spirituality of the indigenous peoples. A number of ceremonies were conducted after the first animal or fish was caught in a season. There were equally a variety of taboos: among the Naskapi of the eastern subarctic, beaver bones were not fed to dogs, thereby avoiding an insult to beavers and ensuring beavers could be hunted in the future. As noted, great respect was accorded to the bear. It was often seen as a 'brother' to humans both in Russia, Scandinavia and North America. Often when a bear was killed, a communal meal was organized and the heart of the bear was cooked and shared. The Cree would place the skull of a bear in a tree, where it could look over water. Among the Sami the bones of the bear were collected after the ritual feast meal and carefully placed in a cave. The belief was that this ritual would make the bear resurrect later. Failure to respect taboos and to conduct necessary ceremonies could bring great harm to the community: illness, misfortune, and hunting failures. Offerings were equally made to spirits to appease them: the Chipewyan Prairie First Nation peoples, for example, would scatter tobacco on the water or offer the smoke from a pipe to assuage the spirits of rivers, rapids, and rocks.

Among the Cree, some people obtained great powers from manitous, and they could cure the sick by calling upon the manitous. The shaman also used a variety of herbal remedies in curing the sick and was equally proficient in setting limbs. Such shamanistic practices were common throughout the north, and the term was coined to describe the practices observed in Russia among the Tungus-speaking Even and Evenki. In the North American subarctic, shamans used sweat baths (i.e., sweat lodges) in healing the sick. The illness, or lost soul, was 'sucked out' of the sick by the shaman. Signs of having a lost soul included listlessness and disparagement. In Alaska, children were thought to be particularly vulnerable to losing their souls because their souls could get caught in thorny berry bushes. With the help of a shaman, however, a lost soul could return to the body it belonged to.

Even though shamans – in Siberia, Scandinavia and in northern Canada – were renowned for their spiritual powers, others could harness spiritual forces. Individual Cree people, for example, would carry a medicine bundle that would contain objects of great spiritual power (Smith 1981). It was also common throughout the subarctic to go on a vision quest. Saukteaux adolescent boys travelled to a remote location where they would fast for four days and wait for a vision. The vision came to the young boy in the form of a bird or an animal that represented the boy's spirit or helper that would stay with the boy throughout his life (Steinbring 1981). Among the Athapaskan speakers of northern Alberta and British Columbia – the Beaver – a young boy on a vision quest gave his life to an animal and he kept tokens of this animal in his medicine bag (Ridington 1981). Though adolescent girls did not venture forth in vision quests, girls could receive unpremeditated visions. Among the Saukteaux, such women could play shamanistic roles, for instance, treating the sick. Others could become sorcerers after experiencing such a vision. All could have dreams, which were an important entry into the spiritual world (Steinbring 1981:251).

Though shamanism does usually involve healing, it equally involves the harnessing of great spiritual power that could be used to attack others. The Saukteaux of the Lake Winnipeg region hosted shamanistic contests where rival shamans competed for power and authority. Well into the 1950s, shamans would take part in a shaking tent rite. This rite was widespread among the various Algonquian speakers. A cylindrical lodge was erected, and inside it a shaman bound tightly sang and drummed to summon spirit helpers. The swaying – the 'shaking' – of the tent, the appearance of strange lights, and a host of animal cries signalled the arrival of spirits. While the tent shook, the shaman called upon the spirits to find lost objects or people, to cure the sick, or to counter any sorcery. The shaman emerged from the tent exhausted, dripping with sweat, and untied. The shaman carried out the rite for a negotiated fee.

Though shamans played an essential role in the community, they were often feared: their power came from spiritual forces that could be used for evil as well as good, and shaman could turn their power against people. The power of shamans would remain, even long after their death, and the burial place of a shaman had to be treated with care, as the soul of the shaman would remain and could cause great harm (Steinbring 1981:250-251).

Supernatural forces that could kill humans also inhabited the circumpolar world. The Dene, for example, feared the ‘bush man’, a half-man, half-animal entity who attacked lone hunters and ate them (Savishinsky and Hara 1981:319). The Cree and other Algonquian-speakers lived in fear of the Windigo, a monster that ate humans. Confrontation with a Windigo could lead to a person ‘becoming Windigo’ a psychological disorder whereby a person would crave human flesh. The condition could be brought about through a shaman’s sorcery. The Cree also believed in *matci manitu*, flame-breathing spirits that flew at night, hunting humans (Smith 1981:263).

Both song and dance were central to spirituality. Among the Beaver First Nation, each animal species was thought to have its own song, and this was given to the person who sought it. Occasionally, people would come together to sing and dance. A large circle of dancers surrounded a fire and followed the path of the Sun. Men, women, and children danced together, but when they sat around the fire, men sat in the northern half and women sat in the southern half. Young hunters would sit in the eastern section, and older men to the west. Likewise, younger women would be in the east, and older women in the west (Ridington 1981:357).

One of the final, and central rites of passage was death. In all Arctic and subarctic cultures, the soul of a deceased individual was encouraged to move on. In certain cases, it was believed that the soul would be reborn in a newborn child. In other cases, it was believed that the soul would move to another spiritual world. Often, the voyage of the soul in the afterlife involved crossing or canoeing down a river. Following the death of an individual, there were many taboos concerning the name of the deceased: quite often, for instance, it was forbidden to say the name of the deceased.

Suggested reading

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Glossary of terms

babiche	rawhide strips used for rope, webbing, fishnets, and numerous other tasks
bast	the inner bark of lindens, or other flexible fibrous bark, used as fibre in matting, etc.
deadfall	a trap in which a raised weight is made to fall on and kill esp. large game.
lean-to	1. a usually temporary shelter consisting of an inclined roof supported at one side by trees or posts and covered with canvas, branches, etc. 2. a roof that has a single slope and is supported at its upper end by a wall or building etc.
manitou	(esp. among the Cree and Ojibwa) 1. a good or evil spirit as an object of reverence. 2 something regarded as having supernatural power.
ridgepole	1. the horizontal pole of a long tent. 2. a beam along the ridge of a roof.
shaman	a person regarded as having access to the world of good and evil spirits.
tumpline	a sling for carrying a load on the back, with a strap which passes around the forehead.
weir	an enclosure of stakes and netting set in a stream or river etc., used for trapping fish.

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