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Canicide in Labrador: Function and meaning of an Inuit killing ritual

J. Garth Taylor*

Résumé: Canicide au Labrador: sens et fonction d'un rituel inuit de mise à mort.

Cet article traite, à partir de descriptions inédites, d'un rituel des Inuit du Labrador impliquant la mise à mort d'un chien. Bien que la fonction de ces canicides ait certainement été de prévenir la maladie et la mort, leur signification profonde demeure obscure. L'auteur examine deux interprétations possibles: l'une suggère que les chiens aient dans ces rituels servi de victimes propitiatoires tandis que l'autre verrait les chiens comme des esprits maléfiques qui doivent être détruits, chassés ou rendus inoffensifs par les gestes rituels. Aucune de ces deux interprétations ne peut être démontrée avec certitude bien que la seconde apparaisse plus congruente avec la pensée inuit relative à la prévention de la mort ou des maladies graves.

Abstract: Canicide in Labrador: Function and meaning of an Inuit killing ritual

The present paper examines unpublished descriptions of a Labrador Inuit ritual which involved the killing of dogs. Although it appears fairly certain that the function of the canicides was the prevention of illness and death, the inner meaning remains more elusive. Two possible interpretations are considered, one suggesting that the dogs were viewed as sacrificial offerings and the other that they were seen as malevolent spirits which had to be destroyed, driven off, or rendered harmless through transformation. While neither can be proven with certainty, the latter appears more consistent with Inuit approaches to the prevention of serious illness and death.

The killing of domestic dogs for magico-religious reasons was widely practiced in both the Old World and the New. Although there are good descriptions of this practice from several societies in North America and the Siberian Arctic, very little is known about ritual canicide among the Inuit. In order to help fill this gap in the ethnographic record, the following paper explores the function and meaning of three canicide incidents which occurred in Labrador during the period 1796-1811.

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All three of the canicide incidents are reported in the unpublished diaries of Moravian missionaries, who established a permanent mission among the Labrador Inuit at Nain in 1771¹. The ritual killings took place at Okak and Hopedale, mission stations founded to the north and south of Nain in 1776 and 1782 respectively². Although the Moravians had been keeping voluminous records of Inuit life for at least a quarter century before the first of these three incidents was reported, there is no previous reference to canicide in the available source material. In the following presentation of the Labrador canicide descriptions, the German text from the Moravian diaries is accompanied by a modern English translation³.

First incident (1796)

The earliest reference to ritual canicide is contained in an entry from the Hopedale diary for October 12, 1796. The man who carried out the canicide was Lucas, who had been baptized at Hopedale nearly twelve years earlier (Hopedale 1785: Mar. 28). The author of the diary was probably the senior missionary at the station, Johann Ludwig Beck (1737-1802), who had served in Labrador since 1773. His account is as follows:

Morgens früh wurde Lucas auf einmal sehr krank, u[nd] fiel auf den Gedanken wie die ungläubigen Eskimo zu thun pflegen, u[nd] liess einen seiner Hunde (an dem freilich nichts verloren war) in sein Zelt bringen, er erstach denselben u[nd] wusch seine Hände in des Hunds seinem Blute, das sollte so viel helfen, ihn vom Tode zu retten, u[nd] der Hund sollte für ihn sterben. [Hopedale 1796: Oct. 12]

English translation

Suddenly, early in the morning, Lucas became very ill and got the idea to do as the unbelieving Eskimo are accustomed to do. He had one of his dogs (which was not worth much anyway) brought into his tent. He stabbed it and washed his hands in the dog's blood. This was supposed to help save him from death and the dog should die instead of him. [H. Taylor trans.]

Subsequent diary entries reveal that Lucas soon began to get better, and that after six days and nights of fever, during which he took medicine from the missionaries, he had recovered.

Second incident (1804)

Another canicide incident was described in an entry of the Okak diary for August 14, 1804. The Moravian station at Okak had been founded 28 years earlier and at this time was still the most northerly European establishment on the coast of Labrador. The reference to canicide was contained in a lengthy description of events at Nauyasiorvik, a

1 The excerpts quoted in this paper are from diaries now housed in the Archiv der Brüder-Unität in Herrnhut, Germany. Permission to use this material is gratefully acknowledged.

2 For the location of Nain, Okak, and Hopedale see Map 1 in Taylor 1974: 12.

3 I am grateful to Dr. Helga Taylor for providing English translations of the German descriptions quoted in this paper.

summer settlement located very near to Okak⁴. The summer settlement had just been visited by the three missionaries Johann Wolff (1753-1814), Johann Schmidt (1766-?), and Johan Hasting (1762-1836). The senior member of this trio, Wolff, had been in Labrador for 23 years.

This incident occurred at a time of great stress, during an epidemic which had started to claim victims a few days earlier (Okak 1804: Aug. 12). When the three missionaries arrived at Nauyasiorvik, where they had been summoned to tend the sick, they learned that one of the many victims who had just died was the wife of a shaman named Uiveruna. Several people had already fled the site "in a great terror" and, just as the missionaries arrived, they saw Uiveruna, who was described as "deadly ill", preparing to depart with several people in an umiak. Uiveruna's actions are described in the mission diary.

Den nachdem die Kranken und Gesunden ins Boot gestiegen waren stieg er nochmals ans Land, liess sich einen Hund (der zwar ein lahmes Bein hatte) fangen, u[nd] stach denselben mit Mörderischen Geiste schnell durch die Brust, mit dessen Blut er sich die Hände wusch u[nd] das Land welches sie soeben verlassen wollten mit des Hundes Blut anblutete zur Abwendung u[nd] Zurückhaltung der bösen Krankheit, damit ihnen der Tod nicht folgen möchte u[nd] gleich darauf segelten sie in die West Bucht ab. So sahen wir zu, wie dieser Bösewicht die Gewohnheiten der Heiden bis zu seinem zu vermutenden Tode trieb... [Okak 1804: Aug. 14]

English translation

After the sick and healthy had got into the boat, he [Uiveruna] once more stepped ashore. He ordered that a dog (which of course had a lame leg) be captured and stabbed it quickly in the chest with the spirit of a murderer. He washed his hands with its blood and let some run on the land which they were just about to leave. This was intended to prevent and hold back the bad disease so that death would not follow them. Immediately after, they sailed into the west bay. So we had to watch how this evil man performed the habits of the heathens until his anticipated death ... [H.Taylor trans.]

A few weeks after the above incident, Uiveruna and his baptized sister Beata, who had also been ill, visited the mission (Okak 1804: Sep. 1). They had apparently recovered from their illness.

Third incident (1811)

A third incident of ritual canicide was reported from Hopedale in the summer of 1811. It took place during an epidemic that was first noted in the station diary on July 24, after a boat arrived from a nearby summer settlement with one corpse and several sick people aboard. The sickness continued to rage until the end of the month, during which time more than a dozen deaths were reported. It was probably the most serious epidemic to strike the people of the Hopedale area since the founding of the mission⁵.

⁴ For the location of Nauyasiorvik see Map 2 in Taylor 1974: 103.

⁵ According to an early Moravian account (Anonymous 1835: 251), this epidemic "bore some distant resemblance to the spasmodic cholera".

This time the missionaries were not witnesses to the dog slaying, which probably did not occur at the station. Instead, they heard of it from Inuit who were gathered at Hopedale several weeks after the epidemic had abated. The testimony of the Inuit was reported in the following manner:

...da nun alle unsere Leute beisammen waren, so wurden uns zu grosser Betrübniß viele Dinge offenbaret die während der Krankenzeit unter unseren Leuten, sonderlich unter den Amls.- Geschwistern vorgekommen sind, nemlich; dass sie bei allen und vielen Versicherungen wie sie nur ihr alleiniges Vertrauen auf Jesum setzten und in seinen Willen ergeben waren, dennoch in der Angst zu heidnischen Gewohnheiten gegriffen, u[nd] durch das erstechen eines Hundes u[nd] abschneiden der Ohren mehrerer Hunde die Krankheit und den Tod abzuwenden sich bemüht haben. Das betrübteste ist dabei die Heuchelei und Verstellung, dass sie aus Unwissenheit geirrt hatten, u[nd] dass sie in einer Art von Geistlichen Schwärmerei das Blutvergiessen der Hunde mit den Opfern der Juden im alten Testament, u[nd] sonderlich dem schlachten des Passach Lammes u[nd] mit dem bestreichen der Turpfosten u[nd] überschwellen mit dem Blute desselben zu vergleichen sich bemühen... [Hopedale 1811: Aug. 26]

English translation

...when all our people were together, to our great distress several circumstances were disclosed to us which happened during the time of sickness among our people, especially among the Communicants. That is to say, in spite of all their many assurances how they would put their only trust in Jesus and submit to His will they nevertheless reached out to heathen customs in their fear and have tried to avert illness and death by stabbing a dog and cutting off the ears of several other dogs. The saddest thing about this is the hypocrisy and pretense that they had erred out of ignorance and that in a kind of spiritual fanaticism have tried to compare this blood-letting of the dogs with the sacrifices of the Jews in the Old Testament and especially with the butchering of the Passover Lamb and with the smearing of doorposts and lintels with the blood of the same... [H.Taylor trans.]

There was a further reference to the same incident one month later, when several baptized Inuit women were speaking with the missionaries before communion.

Die Witwe Dorothea hatte ihres Sohnes Worte — der noch nicht zur Gemeinde gehörte — sehr beunruhigt, indem er sie gefragt hatte, nachdem sie anfang sich von ihrer harten Krankheit zu erholen; "Ob sie wohl jetzo vergnügter sein würde, wenn ihr Hund ohne Ohren gemacht wäre ?"; denn sie hatte im Missmuth über ihre Krankheit und aus Furcht vor dem Sterben ihren Sohn geheissen einem ihrer Hunde die Ohren abzuschneiden, damit durch dessen Bluten die Krankheit u[nd] der Tod abgewendet werden mochte, und auch, dass ihr Hund nicht gesunder und munterer als sie sein sollte; wozu aber ihr Sohn Kutseluk unwillig war, und that es nicht, denn er wusste, dass es nicht recht war. Sie beweinte nun ihre Vergehung... [Hopedale 1811: Sept. 28]

English translation

The widow Dorothea was made very uneasy by the words of her son, who does not yet belong to the congregation. He had asked her, after she had started to recover from her severe illness, whether she would now be happier if her dog had had his ears cut off. Because, discouraged by her illness and out of fear of dying, she had ordered her son to cut off the ears of one of her dogs so that, through his bleeding, illness and death might be averted and also that her dog should not be livelier and healthier than herself. But her son,

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Kutseluk, was not willing and did not do it because he knew it was not right. Now she cried about her transgression... [H.Taylor trans.]

Discussion

Moravian descriptions of the Labrador canicide incidents of 1796-1811 contain several statements about the manifest function of the ritual. In the first incident, Lucas stabbed his dog and washed his hands in its blood "to help save him from death". In the second incident, Uiveruna stabbed a dog, washed his hands in its blood, and then let some of the blood run on the land, which sick and healthy were about to leave, in order "to prevent and hold back the bad disease so that death would not follow them". In the third incident, Inuit of the Hopedale area stabbed one dog and cut off the ears of several others "to avert illness and death". One woman who had asked her son to cut off the ears of her dog had done so in order that "through his bleeding, illness and death might be averted".

All of these statements agree that the function of the canicides was to avoid illness and death, which is entirely consistent with the context in which the ritual killings took place. All three occurrences were associated with illnesses, at least two of which were of an epidemic nature and had already resulted in several deaths. In view of their function, it seems reasonable to include the Labrador canicides in the general category of piacular rites which, in the extended signification proposed by Durkheim (1961: 434), had as a primary object the meeting of a calamity.

Although the function of the Labrador canicide incidents seems clear, the same cannot be said for their inner meaning. The descriptive texts contain very few statements which might reveal Inuit ideas concerning the exact manner in which the canicide rituals were to achieve their function of averting illness and death. One possible exception is contained in the description of the first incident, where it is said of Lucas that "the dog should die instead of him". Another is contained in the description of the third incident, where the widow Dorothea appears to have confessed that "her dog should not be livelier and healthier than herself". Both of these statements imply the notion that the dog's life or its health were being offered as a substitute for the life or health of its owner.

The implication that canicide ritual may have been seen in the light of a substitute killing raises the possibility that it may have also been considered a sacrifice, defined as a gift to gods or spirits. Examples of a close connection between substitute killing and piacular sacrifice, carried out to get rid of danger and misfortune, abound in the anthropological literature. Speaking of piacular sacrifice among the Nuer, Evans-Prichard (1956: 276) has stated that "the general idea underlying such sacrifices was that of substitution, the life of a beast being given in exchange for the life of a man"

The possibility that the Labrador canicides may have had sacrificial meaning deserves careful consideration since prominent students of circumpolar cultures have denied that dog sacrifice was ever practised by the Inuit. Particularly emphatic denials were made by ethnographers who have worked in Siberia, where the sacrifice of both reindeer and dogs played an important role in religious life. Thus, in his description of Koryak sacrifice, Jochelson (1908: 91) includes the assertion that "the dog-raising Eskimo do not slaughter

dogs as a sacrifice to the spirits". This sentiment is echoed by Bogoras (1904-1909: 386) in his statement that the Maritime Chukchi "occupy a middle ground between the American Eskimos, who do not sacrifice dogs, and the Koryak, who often kill almost all the animals of their single team".

The question of whether the Labrador canicides were considered sacrificial offerings, as in Siberia, or whether they were non-sacrificial ritual killings, is difficult to answer with any degree of certainty⁶. Although some of the Siberian sacrifices were carried out to cure disease, suggesting at least some overlap in function with the Labrador canicides, there seems little similarity in ritual behaviour. For example, dog sacrifice in Siberia involved a structured ritual which included precautions to avoid frightening the dog, taking care that the victim fell on its right side, and finally placing the animal on display or, at least, orienting its body in a certain direction (Bogoras 1904-1909: 373; Jochelson 1908: 94). The descriptions of Labrador canicide include none of these features and, instead, state that the dog was stabbed "quickly in the chest with the spirit of a murderer". In the light of this description, which sounds more like an attack than an act of sacrifice, there seems little reason to assume a particularly close connection between the ritual killing of dogs in the two geographically separated areas.

One feature of the Labrador canicides which has been reported from Siberia is the sprinkling of blood on the ground, witnessed in the second canicide incident. Among the Chukchi, the blood of sacrificial victims was scattered about as part of the offering to various spirits, most of which were regarded as "good beings" (Bogoras 1904-09: 370). The Koryak, on the other hand, often sprinkled blood of animals on the ground as an offering to evil spirits known as *kalau* (Jochelson 1908: 93). It is said that this blood, taken from the wounds of animals which had been sacrificed to a Supreme Being, was given to the evil spirits as part of the price paid for preventing their attacks upon human beings.

Although the blood was sprinkled on the ground as an exuvial sacrifice in Siberia, there is no reason to assume that it had a similar meaning for the Labrador Inuit. The only possible clue to Inuit opinion on the significance of the scattered blood is contained in the description of the third canicide. Here it is stated that the Inuit "tried to compare this blood-letting of the dogs with the sacrifices of the Jews in the Old Testament and especially with the butchering of the Passover Lamb and with the smearing of doorposts and lintels with the blood of the same". It is important to recognize that this comparison does not mention anything about the role of the animal victims as offerings and therefore does not indicate that the Labrador Inuit saw their own canicide as a sacrifice. The main emphasis seems to be on the smearing of blood on "doorposts and lintels" in the Biblical account. Bearing in mind that the latter action, as described in Exodus 12: 23, was intended to spare the ancient Hebrews from a destroying spirit that was passing through their land, it seems possible that the Inuit saw their own use of blood as a protection against malevolent spirits. Whether its ability to protect was seen in a direct, magical manner, or whether the blood was regarded as exuvial sacrifice, simply cannot be ascertained.

6 For a discussion of non-sacrificial ritual killing see Ruel 1990.

The tenuous case for interpreting the Labrador canicides as sacrifice is further weakened by the fact that sacrifice in general played a much less important role among Inuit than it did among Siberian groups such as the Chukchi and Koryak. While admitting that sacrifice was "not entirely unknown" to the Inuit, Birket-Smith (1959: 170) has stated that "on the whole the Eskimos endeavour more to exert a magical control over nature and the 'supernatural' than to seek the favour of the powers". Those sacrifices which have been reported tend to be of a rather trifling nature, and do not appear to involve the ritual killing of animals. Examples would include the pieces of seal-skin and ivory which Inuit on the west coast of Hudson Bay gave to the spirits who made thunder storms (Boas 1901-1907: 146). In Labrador, it has been reported that the Inuit of Cape Chidley formerly threw their "broken knives, worn-out harpoon-heads, and pieces of meat and bone into the sea" as an offering to the sea woman (Hawkes 1916: 126).

It is unfortunate that descriptions of Inuit culture provide very few examples of curing ritual which involves the killing of dogs. One of the few examples comes from West Greenland, where people from the Sukkertoppen and Julianehaab districts sometimes hung a dog belonging to a sick person on the house post (Birket-Smith 1924: 424). Elsewhere in West Greenland, people in the Egedesminde district gave a sick person's saliva to a dog which, as soon as it showed symptoms of illness, was killed. Although the first of these customs bears some resemblance to the Siberian custom of hanging dogs on posts, reported from the Koryak (Jochelson 1908: 94), neither bear any formal resemblance to the canicides from Labrador. Thus, even if the meanings of the Greenland customs were known, they would be of limited help in suggesting possible meanings for the Labrador canicides.

Although Inuit ethnography provides little comparative information on curing ritual involving the killing of dogs, a mutilation ritual from Northern Québec includes one of the features noted in the Labrador canicides. This common feature was the sprinkling of blood on the ground which, as already noted, has been also reported from Siberia. A brief account of the mutilation ritual was included in the following discussion of Inuit healing techniques by ethnographer Lucien Turner.

The tail of a living dog is often cut from its body in order that the fresh blood may be cast upon the ground to be seen by the spirit who has caused the harm, and thus he may be appeased. Numerous mutilations are inflicted upon animals at the command of the conjurer, who must be consulted on nearly all the important undertakings of life in order that he may manage the spirits which will insure success. [Turner 1894: 197]

Although this reference indicates that it was the dogs' tails that were removed, and not their ears as in the third Labrador incident, another ritual described by Turner (1894: 202) refers to the cropping of either tail or ear. The latter ritual was carried out whenever dogs managed to eat caribou meat, an act which was considered taboo because it was thought to offend the guardian spirit of the caribou. The cutting of the tail or ear "to allow a flow of blood" was intended to prevent the spirit from refusing to send further supplies, a punishment which, like serious illness, could obviously have disastrous consequences. It seems likely that the northern Quebec rituals involving canine

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mutilation were related to the one from Labrador, which was in turn associated with the actual canicides. Turner's comment that the blood poured on the land in the curing ritual was "to be seen by the spirit who has caused the harm" is instructive, since it suggests that the blood of canine victims, which appears to have played such a prominent role in both the canicide and mutilation rituals, was important for its impact on malevolent spirits. Unfortunately, Turner does not spell out the precise nature of this impact; he merely suggests that the spirits are "appeased" when they have "seen" the blood.

The removal of ears and tails from dogs, noted in Labrador and Northern Québec, has also been reported from Greenland. As recently as the 1950s, people in West Greenland practised the "old" custom of cutting off part of the tails from living puppies. The function of this operation was to save the litter "when puppies begin to die one after the other" (Jensen 1961: 56). Elsewhere in Greenland, people cut off a piece of the dog's ear for a similar reason, which was "to save the puppy litter from death when there was a threatening danger of it" (Jensen 1961:57). Aside from their function, most of the original ideas surrounding these customs have been forgotten in modern Greenland. Nevertheless, it has been suggested that the Greenland custom was "performed by the Eskimo as a penance or measure of prevention with regard to the invisible forces surrounding them" (Jensen 1961: 58).

Since Inuit ethnography offers little comparative material on the killing and/or mutilation of dogs as a piacular rite, it seems reasonable to expand the search for meaning of the Labrador canicides to include other Inuit techniques employed against life-threatening calamities. Techniques which fall in this category and which offer several interesting parallels with the Labrador canicides have been reported from Baffin Island and the Igloolik region, areas which were close to Labrador both in the geographic and cultural sense. The techniques in question are those based on the belief that sickness and death are often caused by evil spirits known as *tupilait* (sing. *tupilaq*). Some of these spirits were made by enemies in order to destroy people and thus corresponded to the man-made *tupilait* known from Greenland (Boas 1901-1907: 153). Others were the angry souls of dead people who sought revenge because people had failed to observe the proper taboos following their death (Boas 1901-1907: 131).

One method of curing illness caused by the *tupilait* was to stab the evil spirits with a knife, a task usually reserved for shamans. Sometimes the knife wound went so deep that it was assumed the evil spirit had been destroyed (Rasmussen 1929: 144). In other cases, the battle would drive away the *tupilait* causing the sickness (Boas 1901-1907: 508). Yet another technique, used against those *tupilait* which were considered angry ghosts, was to cut off the transgressions which had caused the ghost to become a *tupilaq*, thereby allowing it to once again become a peaceful soul (Boas 1901-1907: 131). It can be readily seen that these acts have counterparts in the Labrador canicides, which resemble the stabbing of *tupilait*, as well as in the linked custom of cutting off dogs' ears and tails, which suggests a parallel with cutting off transgressions from the *tupilait*.

Just as the stabbing of *tupilait* resembles the Labrador canicides in the act itself, there is also a similarity in the disposition of the victim's blood. It has been frequently noted that shamans who have engaged in battles with *tupilait* display hands that are bloody from

the fight (Rasmussen 1929: 144, 147). It seems possible that this display of bloody hands, which recalls the washing of hands with blood in the first two Labrador canicides, may have had a deeper meaning than to simply prove that "the battle has occurred", as suggested by Boas (1901-1907: 508). If the blood of the canine victims was thought to offer protection against evil spirits, already suggested as a possible reason for scattering it on the ground, its application to the hands of people who were critically ill and/or engaged in a dangerous struggle with malevolent spirits would seem most appropriate.

In view of the formal and functional similarities between the attacks on *tupilait* and the Labrador canicides, it seems plausible that there may have been parallels in meaning as well. This raises the possibility that the canine victims, which were treated in a very similar way to the *tupilait*, were somehow perceived as malevolent spirits rather than as sacrificial offerings. In considering this possibility, it is important to realize that *tupilait*, while often invisible, had the ability to assume the shape of various animals (Boas 1901-1907: 507; Rasmussen 1929: 107). Thus, the dogs attacked in Labrador canicides and mutilations could easily have been seen as *tupilait* or similar beings.

The identification of dogs with evil spirits was illustrated in another Labrador canicide which occurred long after the incidents that have been considered in this paper. In the 1870s, during a time of great economic hardship, some Inuit at Nain set out to destroy a dog which they considered to be Satan. The dog was axed in the back by its master and eventually pursued to the ice, where it was killed and buried by people from several houses in the village (Periodical Accounts, 1874: 199). Although this incident occurred in response to economic deprivation rather than disease and although it employed the Christian concept of Satan to personify evil, the fact that a dog was identified as a supernatural cause of misfortune may well have been based on traditional concepts.

This increases the likelihood that the Inuit of earlier times saw the victims of their canicide rituals as malevolent spirits which had to be destroyed, driven off, or rendered harmless. This possibility, as with the alternative hypothesis that the dogs were intended as sacrificial offerings to spiritual entities, can probably never be proven with certainty. As seen in this paper, analysis is seriously hampered by the paucity of direct Inuit testimony on the meaning of their canicide rituals. Nevertheless, comparative material on the prevention of life-threatening illness by Canadian Inuit lends greater credence to the notion that the dogs were perceived as causal agents than to the idea that they were seen as mere sacrificial offerings.

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