



CEREMONIAL ROBES OF THE MONTAGNAIS-NASKAPI

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There are only a few ceremonial robes of the Montagnais-Naskapi Indians in our museum collections about which, until recently, very little has been known. There are a number of reasons for this. The Montagnais-Naskapi were nomadic hunters who struggled to survive in the harsh environment of the Quebec-Labrador peninsula. Isolated by geographical boundaries, their world ended at the borders of their territory, some 500,000 square miles. In prehistoric times the tribe probably barely numbered 4000. The people lived divided into small bands which had to split into two to three related family groups during the long

winter. These Indians were, therefore, an inward-looking people, secretive and self-contained, who were reluctant to reveal their beliefs or, for that matter, the ceremonies and objects in which these are reflected.

Information, then, about the use and meaning of these robes has until lately been piecemeal and often confusing at best. Similarly, interpretations of their designs have been speculative. We now know that, although the Montagnais-Naskapi depended on primitive implements such as the bow and arrow, foremost they relied on magic in their struggle for survival; and as we shall see, the ceremonial robe formed an important part of their secret paraphernalia.

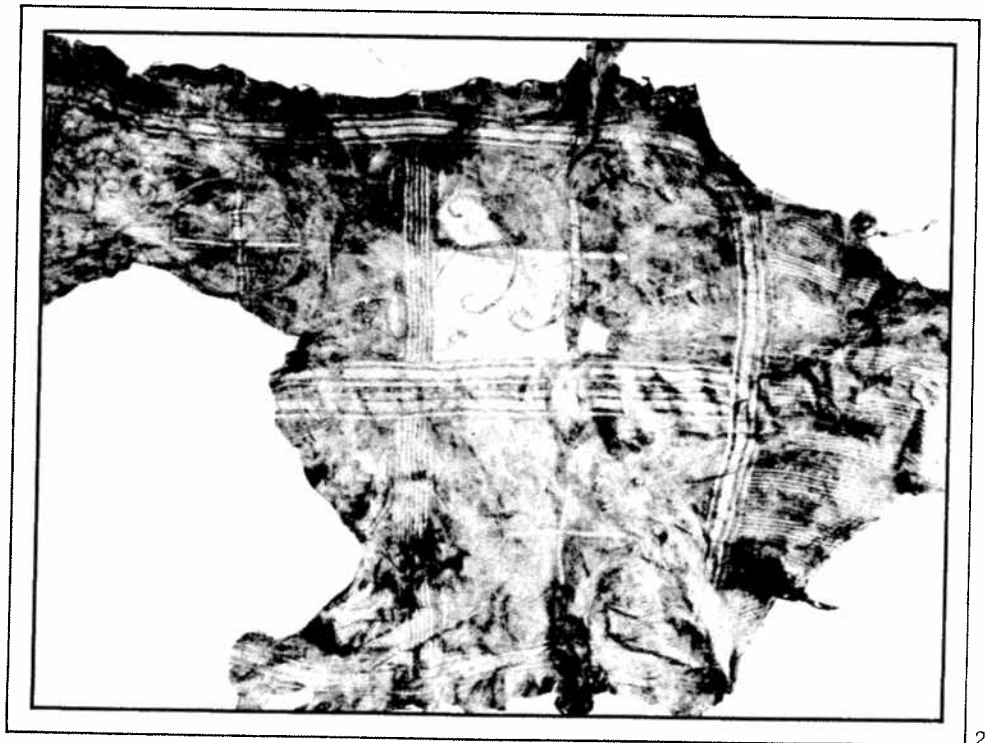
There are only two pre-twentieth century Montagnais-Naskapi robes in our collections, the so-called Speyer robe, now in the National Museum of Man in Ottawa (Fig. 1) and the Catlin robe, or more accurately, the fragment of it which is extant, now in the Smithsonian Institution (Fig. 2). Later robes were collected by Richard White in the vicinity of Voisey's Bay and Kauk on the Atlantic coast. From the early part of the twentieth century until his death in 1950, White was in touch with members of the Barren Ground and Davis Inlet bands, collecting almost exclusively for anthropologist Frank Speck who never visited this extreme northeastern part of the peninsula. White collected only six or seven robes, all of which are incorrectly identified as women's shawls in the museums in which they were subse-

quently deposited. Aside from these, the only ceremonial robes available are those specifically made for or collected by the writer among the Davis Inlet Indians during the 1960s, now in the National Museum of Man in Ottawa. There are also drawings of ceremonial robes made for the writer in various areas.

It is likely that the robes collected by White were all painted by the wife of Old Sam, the last great Davis Inlet shaman who died in 1958. It was from his son that I obtained the following information about the shaman's use of the robe. According to this account, the short summer with its lengthy days and nearly uninterrupted social and physical activity, comes to an end in September. At this time the caribou migrate inland from the coast and the chief, too, guided by his inner vision, must lead the people inland for the long winter months. The importance of a large kill at this time is paramount, for it will enable the band to stay together for a while longer, and they can utilize the caribou skins which are best from September through December and of which most of their clothing and other items were made.

In some years the caribou change their migration route, forcing the desperate people to call upon their shaman for aid. In this crucial period the shaman is able to assist his people through the magic of the robe. Standing on a rock near open water and wrapped in a snow white caribou skin, his Lucky Deerskin,¹ the shaman is transformed into caribou or even Katipeni-

1. Ceremonial robe. Naskapi, c.1740. Native tanned unsmoked caribou skin. 105cm x 118cm. Edges cut into short fringe, strands were originally bound with red porcupine quills. Short tab extensions at corners cut into 6-strand fringe, each quill wrapped, strung with brass cone and originally red hair tassel. Red-painted border originally decorated with diagonal lanes of red quillwork in zigzag band technique; fragments remain. Designs painted in gold (from fish glue which yellows with age), red and blue-green. Formerly in the collection of the Grand Duke of Baden, marked "Decke eines Schamanens, Nenenot." An early label read "Hauptman 1740." Purchased by the museum from Arthur Speyer. Courtesy National Museums of Canada, Ethnology Division, Cat. No. III-B-588.



2. Ceremonial robe fragment. Naskapi, ante 1846. Collected by George Catlin. Native tanned unsmoked caribou skin. 100.5cm long, 63cm wide. The large center area is divided into quadrants by intersecting bands of red lines and size markings. Within each quadrant is a complex motif. Smithsonian Institution, Cat. No. 386,525. Neg. No. 74-2615.



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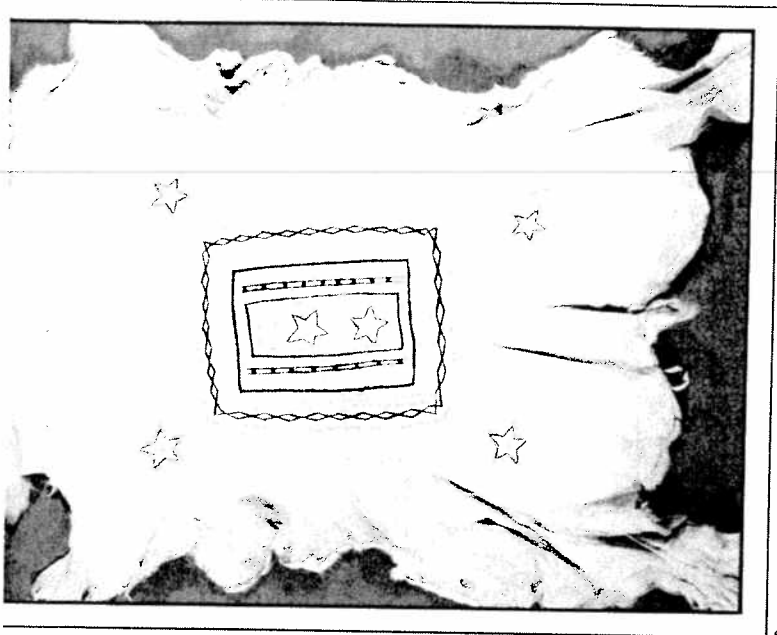
mitach, Lord of the Caribou, who "bawling all the time" attracts his kind. Not until the prey has come close does the shaman reveal himself as a man by taking off the skin and "he waves the robe, waves it." By this time the caribou can no longer escape and the band's young hunters rush from ambush for the kill. "Plenty were killed then," according to Old Sam's son; "that's how my father helped" (Figs. 7-9).

But the snow-white robe, *Osiha-kano mistikway* (the deerskin for producing or making something, the Lucky Deerskin), was not only used by the shaman. It formed part of the equipment of all older powerful Naskapi. According to information volunteered by Joe Rich, the recently deceased chief of the Davis Inlet band, and Old Sam's son, the head of the skin was placed on the hunter's head or shoulders just before he started for the hunt. Transformed thereby into caribou, he was sure to encounter his "brother." "If you do not wear a Lucky Deerskin you can't kill deer." For without his transformation, there was no chance for the hunter to be in the right place, thus enabling his brother caribou to give his body to him. As soon as the kill had been made, however, the hunter had to remove the robe and return it to its special bag, so that the skin would not

be soiled with the animal's blood. The robe was worn with the painted design inside, protecting its power and allowing it to be readily absorbed by its wearer.²

In addition to being worn by both the shaman and hunters during the hunt, the robes were crucial to the Montagnais-Naskapi during certain divination/regeneration rites. In 1820 James Clouston, an employee of the Hudson's Bay Company, was probably the first to record the use of ceremonial robes during a Mokushan, a feast (All Eat Feast) held on various occasions, notably when the band met again after the long and solitary winter (Clouston 1963).³

Older Naskapi furnished information about the significance of this feast, indicating that it is a ritual eating of caribou in which everyone in the encampment has to participate according to status, sex and age. Because specific portions of the dismembered animal are eaten by certain chosen individuals, it is probable that the ritual is part of a widespread type of creation myth, according to which the human race is descended from the dismembered parts of a primordial body. In this case, the constant emphasis in Clouston's account of the importance of nothing's being wasted and food's being shared in a prescribed manner gains added



3. Ceremonial robe. Naskapi. Received by the museum from the estate of Frank Speck, 1958; collected before 1950. Native tanned unsmoked caribou skin, hair left on. 100.3cm long at center, 72.4cm wide at waistline. Made by the older wife of the shaman Old Sam, Davis Inlet. Geometric designs painted in red, orange and blue. Skin trimmed along edges but original contour largely remains. Several small holes stitched with black thread including one traverse A star. 31.7cm circle in center with four 4-pointed stars about 7.6cm from rim; each star divided into 4 rhomboid figures. Courtesy Royal Ontario Museum, Cat. No. 958.131.643.

4. Ceremonial robe. Naskapi. Received by the museum from Frank Speck, 1932; collected among the Naskapi Indians, Barren Ground, Labrador. Native tanned unsmoked caribou skin. 150cm long, 100cm wide. Made by the older wife of the shaman Old Sam, Davis Inlet. Note square-centered design painted in red, blue and yellow. Courtesy National Museum of Denmark, Cat. No. H 2735. Photograph by Lennart Larsen.

significance. No part of the whole can be neglected for such action would annihilate part of the people, part of the world. The erection of the special tent for the feast or the special preparation of an already erected tent, is another aspect of world creation reenactment.

The sun – represented on the sacred food as well, in the form of fire – is the transformer that will purify and revitalize the animal from its skeleton, when the Lord receives his prescribed share. We learn that part of the food was put in fire “where it came from” and that the hunter addresses himself to the rising sun. I was informed that the leader of the Mokushan becomes the Lord’s physical limbs taking care of the sacred marrow and long bones and I observed that the drumming, singing and dancing which follow the Mokushan also represent a joyous celebration of rebirth.

Clouston’s account, too, records that a small child was wrapped in a painted robe and had to crawl, unassisted, like an earthworm from the hostile world from which the feast is always protected, into the tent. The child is unwrapped or born, and brings with it the properties of the robe in which it has been encased – creation, life, the caribou spirit – which are then transferred to all.

This aspect of the Mokushan ritual seems to be related directly to a legend of the Naskapi culture hero, Tshkabish, entitled “Jahabash thrown out of his mother’s womb,” which was illustrated and described in a small booklet published in 1977 (Naskapi Band Council of Schefferville 1977). In this legend, too, a small child is bound tightly in a ceremonial robe which, when opened, allows the child to be released into the world.⁴

Joe Rich related another ceremony that he had performed in desperate times, in which the robe insured complete darkness thereby allowing the appearance of inner light to guide the hunter. According to his

account, in the late evening, an old hunter, usually a shaman, would place a small decorated object (often contained and dissected with two wooden sticks) in front of himself and then visualize it as a geographical area, part of his hunting territory. Then, placing his ceremonial robe over his head, he would wait in complete darkness. After several hours of constant gazing, Katipenimitach, Lord of the Caribou, as well as man, might reveal the location either of caribou or of other Indians. If this happened, lights would appear on the pattern of the object. According to the chief, one type of light – “like matches burn quick and red” – signified people and another kind – “like northern lights shifting as the animals they heralded” – signified caribou.⁵

Joe Rich and Old Sam’s sons volunteered information, too, about the designs painted on the robes, though here the secretiveness with which magical forms are guarded reaches a peak, for only a son may know of his father’s robe symbols. Thus only the son of the shaman could explain that the large circle in the center of the robe, which had been painted by his mother, represents the sun, and together with blue paint, assures fine weather, as the stars depicted on the four corners do during the night (Fig. 3).

The sun figure covers from one-eighth to three-fourths of the robe,⁶ the variation perhaps associated with the seasons. In summer when it was warmer and food was reasonably plentiful, the sun could be represented by only a small disc. In winter, however, warmth and food became of paramount importance, and so the image of the sun had to increase in size.

Well over 500,000 years ago, man captured fire, a part of the sun, for his own use, and this enabled him to survive in northern latitudes, notably during the Ice Age. The sun’s rising was regarded as a reenactment of this vital discovery, which also symbolized man’s spir-

itual renewal. Among the Naskapi this event is related in the myth of the culture hero, Tshekabish. Enshrined on the ceremonial robe which may only be painted when the sun is rising (Clouston 1963), the event is still celebrated by donning the garment and dancing around the fire. Significantly, early historical records show that these nomadic hunters invoked their gods by using the sun's name. We should recall, too, that the sun figured prominently in Clouston's account of the Mokushan ceremony.

This concern with the sun may explain as well why birds were depicted on ceremonial robes (Fig. 6). According to my informants, the American three-toed woodpecker is a good bird to see as he shows most about the sun; his toes indicate the source of the sun both in winter and in summer. Perhaps for this reason birds were depicted on ceremonial robes. Alternately, one of the sons of the shaman explained that the Indians used to paint birds on the robes when the first birds arrived in early spring; this painting was followed by a Mokushan to insure that more birds would follow.

The old Davis Inlet chief explained, too, that the robe was hung on a *nimaban* (game string) between two poles which had been stripped of their bark, an observation already reported by Clouston. The design on the robe faced the rising sun "to please the supernatural world and to invite the deer to come."

Only when the weather was good could the hunter pursue game, and only at that time could he wear the robe: "Lucky Deerskin likes to see the sun, it would be heresy to wear it at any other time." The robe may have been believed to absorb the sun's power just as a stone absorbs the sun's rays. Thus the skin insured the sun's presence long after its literal disappearance by releasing its magical properties as the need arose. Even more significantly, the age-old cycle of physical and spiritual renewal of the world and man, symbolized by the rising sun, was magically assured by manipulation of the ceremonial robe with its prominent sun symbol. This renewal included the return of the caribou.

Around 1930, women coming from the Montagnais area, the southern part of the peninsula, who married Naskapi men, were not able to paint their husbands' coats. Painting on skin had long been abandoned by the Montagnais who instead decorated cloth with beads and silk. However, these women were still able to paint ceremonial robes. We know now that from the north shores of the St. Lawrence to Ungava Bay, from Hudson Bay to the Atlantic, the robe was the hunter's single most sacred and efficient implement. The wide distribution, the late decline and the manner in which its use was kept secret until 1960 are indeed awesome.

In the James Bay/Hudson Bay area, even the oldest Indians could not remember that skin clothing was once painted, but they did recall the painted robe which was used until about 1925. Nelly Moor, from the Rupert's House band on James Bay, made a drawing of a cere-

monial robe and explained that in this area the robe was called *weweshihakanau*, which translates as "fancy clothes on," although apparently the robe was not worn. The robe was "fixed" when the sun was rising with red paint, red fringes and beaded pendants and ribbons. Fringes, often dyed red, can be seen on various Montagnais-Naskapi garments, notably coat collars, and especially on ceremonial robes. Such fringes are also worn separately as necklaces that hang down the back and are reminiscent of the circumpolar "skeleton" motif portraying the very source of life, the mystical rebirth from bones.

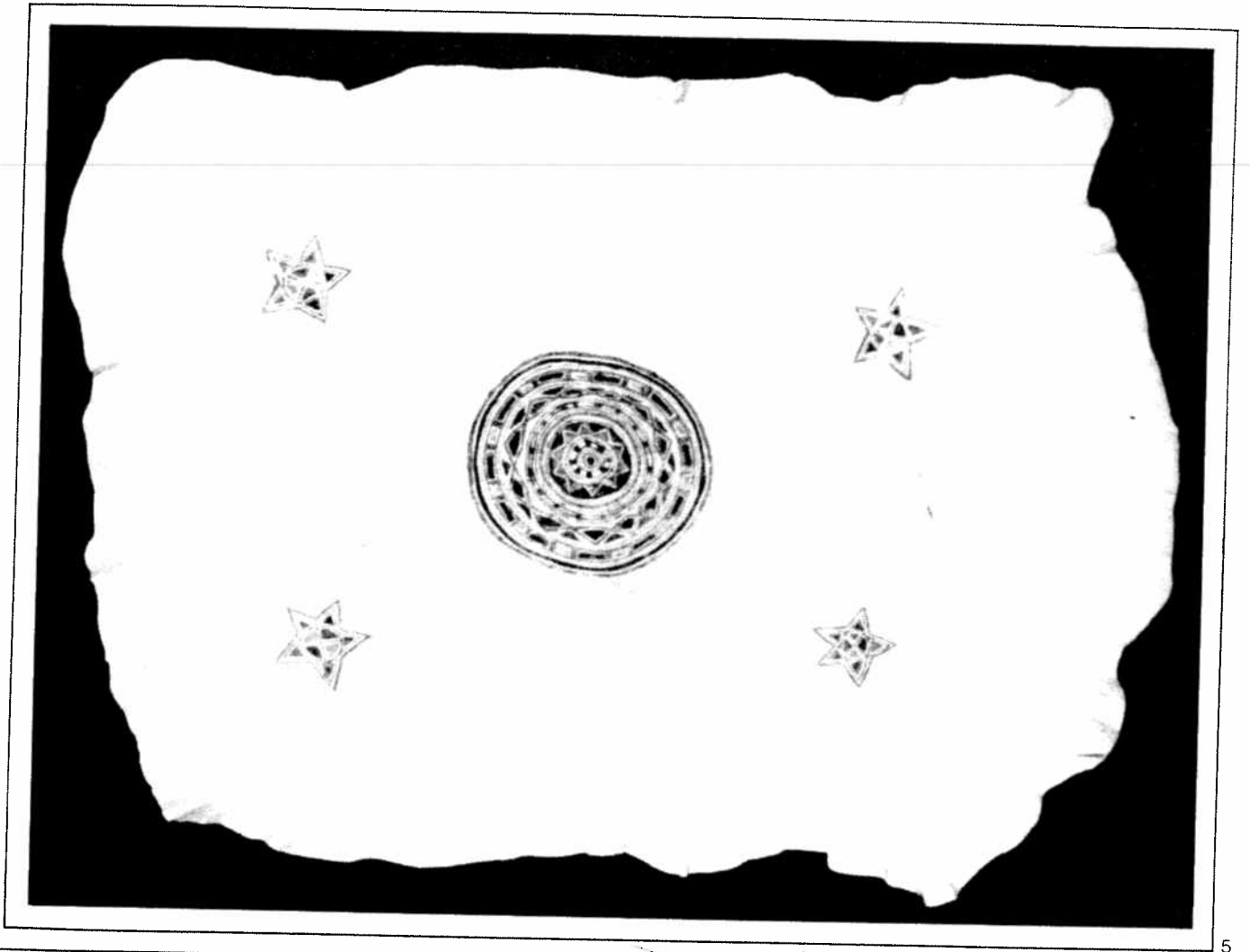
Nelly Moor related that as many as six fixed hides at a time were hung on a pole, stripped of its bark, when the sun was rising, and left there for half an hour or an hour or until the sun set. This was done for good luck, to allow the hunter to kill more. Another informant from the same band added "*Tse Manitu* who lives in heaven can see the robe and he is pleased with the sight, more caribou would come. Mistapeo [associated with the shaman in this area] is also pleased to see these skins and when seeing them he would dance."

David Eiserhoff of the Eastmain band explained that the painting of the caribou skins by old women, often with a quill-like pen to make dots, was also thought to bring good luck so that more caribou could be killed. "The red paint used is to make it pretty," he said, "and means blood." Likewise, John Einish, a Naskapi from Ungava Bay who was "resettled" to Schefferville, also made a sketch of a ceremonial robe in 1962. Asked why he decorated a skin like this, he replied: "Needed in bush." It should be noted that moose have replaced caribou completely in this region. It is significant, then, that I was informed that in this area bear and beaver skins were never decorated but moose skins were.⁷

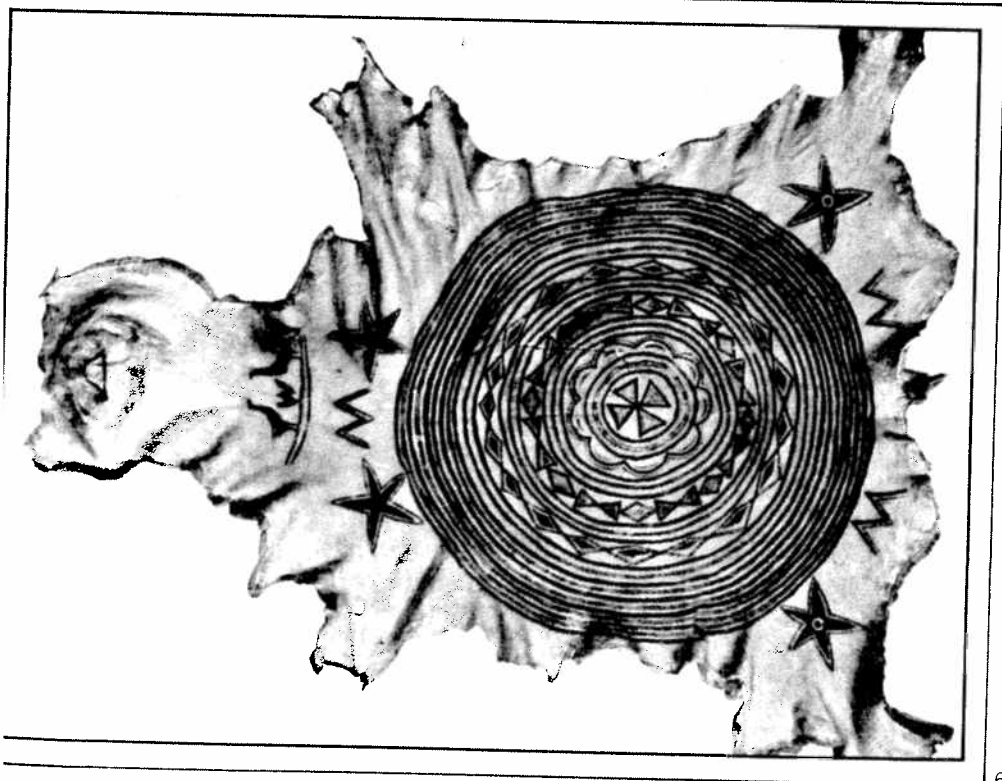
The Two Oldest Ceremonial Robes

The oldest ceremonial robe in our collection was made around 1740 (Fig. 1). Other than its approximate date and information about the previous owner provided by Speyer who sold the robe to the National Museum of Man in Ottawa, no information about this robe is available. Anything else that has been written about it, even by Speyer and Brassler, is based on speculation; and it is doubtful that the skin, including the dream vision depicted on it, has ever been interpreted in a manner that would satisfy the Naskapi who once envisioned and owned the robe (Brassler 1974, 1976; Benndorf and Speyer 1968). It is likely, however, that we may come close to understanding the ultimate significance of the robe and the pattern on it if we consider it specifically as a device used by a shaman.

The robe is made of tanned caribou skin with fringed edges that were originally wrapped with red porcupine quills. The short tab extension at each corner is cut into a six-strand fringe, each strand quill wrapped and strung



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5. Ceremonial robe. Naskapi. Received by the museum from the estate of Frank Speck, 1958; collected before 1950. Native tanned unsmoked caribou skin. 111.8cm long, 81.3cm wide at center. Made by the older wife of the shaman Old Sam, Davis Inlet. Approximately rectangular, all edges trimmed. Five geometric decorations in red, blue and yellow; large solidly painted 24.1cm circle surrounded by four 5-pointed stars, each about 16.5cm from circumference and approximately 10.2cm wide. Courtesy Royal Ontario Museum, Cat. No. 958.131.644.

6. Ceremonial robe. Naskapi. Received by the museum from Frank Speck; collected before 1946. Native tanned unsmoked caribou skin. 137.2cm long, 96.5cm wide. Presumably made by the older wife of the shaman Old Sam, Davis Inlet. Pattern in red, blue and yellow is a large sun symbol which covers a substantial part of the robe. Note four 5-pointed stars, 2 birds, triangle and 4 W-patterns, the latter usually interpreted as neck bone of the caribou and represents this animal on many painted patterns. Courtesy Denver Art Museum, Cat. No. 1946.223.



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7-9. The recently deceased chief of the Davis Inlet band, Joe Rich (Shushepish), 1962, demonstrating the shaman's use of the ceremonial robe. These photographs will probably remain unique. Photographs by Ray Webber.

with a brass cone and (originally) a tassel of red hair. The red-painted border around the skin was originally decorated with diagonal lanes of red quillwork in a zigzag-band technique. The white skin is completely covered with painted patterns, executed predominantly in red, with yellow and a little blue added, and consisting to a great extent of double curves.

More than 1500 decorated Montagnais-Naskapi specimens have been studied by the present writer and, based on these, it seems more than likely that the Speyer robe comes from the extreme northeastern area, the only area in which double curve patterns of the type on this robe are known. It is important to note also that the shape of the robe differs fundamentally from all those previously discussed which were made from whole skins slightly trimmed at the edges.

Carl Schuster, in his paper titled *Skin and Fur Mosaics in Prehistoric and Modern Times*, may supply us with an answer about why this robe is rectangular and what significance this shape might have. He discussed a nearly

square robe of the Tehuelche Indians of southern Patagonia (Schuster 1964:562, Fig. 2), composed of the skins of twelve guanacos which have been trimmed so as to fit into each other in alternating upright and inverted columns of two skins each. But two of the twelve skins have been split down the middle (i.e. along the lines of the animal's backbone), and the split edges of the resulting halves have been faced outward, so as to form the straight sides of the rectangle represented by the robe as a whole. Schuster contends that this shape may have evolved in response to purely practical considerations: the most economical use of animal skins. But he goes on to say that in an economy almost exclusively dependent on hunting, animals would be of immense importance. The influence of totemism, in the sense of a mystic affinity or identity between animals and human beings, may be presumed to have played a role in suggesting an equivalence between the component skins of a robe and human figures. Since we know that in totemic systems animals were associated not so

much with individuals as with classes of individuals who stood in a potential marriage relationship to each other, it seems reasonable to suppose that totemic ideas played a role in suggesting not only the basic equivalence of animal skins with human figures, but also the equivalence of the splitting of these skins with a social dichotomy. The longitudinal splitting of a sacrificed animal along its spine is, or was, directly associated with the conception of social alignment within the tribe. According to Schuster, this becomes clear in light of a number of east African myths of tribal origin, in which the primary social "split," that between moieties eligible for intermarriage, is symbolized by the legendary splitting of a sacrificed animal, the two halves being assigned to the progenitors of the two main marriage classes within the tribe. Schuster further suggests that the type of fur mosaic resulting from this technique may already be evident in the Paleolithic period, and that such robes and designs are extremely widespread in both the Old and New Worlds.

It is noteworthy that other nearly square robes are known to have been used by the North American Indian both in the extreme northeastern and western areas. For example, on Beothuck dress Howley notes: "This was peculiar to the tribe, and consisted of two deer skins... a sort of mantle, formed out of two deer skins, sewed together so as to be nearly square" (Howley 1915:212). Father Morice, in his work on the Western Dénés, remarks: "the Raz... the ceremonial robe [worn like an apron] was originally of tanned caribou skin." In the text which follows he gives the dimensions and also a sketch of the Raz, which is rectangular in shape (Morice 1895:179-180). Ewers, moreover, noted:

As links between the Naskapi and the Plains painting we may point out a limited number of examples of old painted hides preserved in the Musée d' Ethnographie in Paris. One of these... is a skin mantle, *rectangular in shape* [*italics mine*], bearing a painted border decoration in red, yellow, blue and green. Additional parallel lines barely noticeable—extend over the surface of the hide.... The exact tribal origin of this specimen is not known, though it is from Canada and certainly antedates the late years of the eighteenth century (Ewers, 1939:48-49).

The matter of parallel painted lines on Naskapi items has been treated before (Webber 1968).

In light of this, the rectangular shape of the Speyer robe gains added significance. It is conceivable that this, like the Tehuelche robe, is a late example of an ancient tradition in which skins are split and composed to form a rectangle; and that these robes—composed of many human figures—represent the people as a whole. Although the Speyer robe is made of one skin, its rectangular shape suggests a symbolism similar, if not identical, to that of the Tehuelche robe.

Two of the ceremonial robes painted by Old Sam's wife should also be mentioned in this context. One of these has been trimmed at the edges in such a way as to make it nearly rectangular (Fig. 5). The other robe,

possessed by yet another son of Old Sam, has a square-centered design (Fig. 4). It is regrettable that when shown a photograph of the robe, Old Sam's son declined to give any information about it after his initial surprised recognition of the piece. It is doubtful that we shall ever know more about the square-centered design unless the related features of the two oldest robes offer some clue.

Of the Catlin robe, collected before 1846 and now in the Smithsonian Institution, there is only a fragment left, but it is enough to enable one to visualize the whole skin and its pattern (Fig. 2). The large center area is divided into quadrants by intersecting bands of red lines and size markings. Within each quadrant is a complex motif consisting of a circle elaborated with double curves; and the circle itself is divided into four equal sections forming a cross. If we compare this pattern with that of the older Speyer robe (Fig. 1), it becomes apparent that all the main forms of one robe are repeated on the other. The squareness is apparent on both robes; on one in the actual form of the skin; on the other, in the pattern's component parts.

The circle in the center of the near-square is a dominant motif on both of the old robes. Since the circle was interpreted as the sun on all later robes, it is conceivable that here too the sun, the divine, is depicted. Various interpretations may be suggested for the circles on the Catlin robe. Among the Naskapi, circles or red dots in similar-looking patterns are often interpreted as star constellations. Star patterns are prominently depicted on all the robes painted by Old Sam's wife. They are often painted, too, on the chest of a Naskapi boy when he wears his small ceremonial robe, his *Atikwish* (Figs. 10, 11). This constellation is called *Wapun* (it is dawn). To the Indian, it looked much like a caribou; we know it as the Little Dipper, the handle of which terminates in the North Star so frequently used by these nomads as a guide. Thus the pattern may protect its wearer from getting lost. In this manner, too, the young hunter is magically linked to the heavenly bodies whose rhythmic path he follows.

The cross form—on the inside of the circle on the Catlin robe and expanding on the outside of the circle on the Speyer robe—is also prevalent on two later robes, in the center of the sun (Fig. 6). The cross is also evident in the overall pattern of all Old Sam's robes, for the center is the sun and at each cardinal point a star is painted (Fig. 3). Several Naskapi explained to me that the cross is a symbol of the shaman, painted on his tent door and appearing in many forms on his paraphernalia. When represented in dot form, it is known as "the signature of the shaman." The last five drum beats, when the sorcerer strikes the four cardinal points and finally the center, reveals this symbol's significance. The last beat "in the center of the world" indicates that the spirit flight has been completed, that the shaman has passed through the crucial zone.

The many double curve patterns on the Speyer and Catlin robes appear on other Naskapi items and are

10. Grandson of Mrs. William Katshinak wearing his newly made Atikwish, 1961. One of 4 Atikwish made by Mrs. Katshinak, a Davis Inlet Indian, in 1961 and 1962. Robes of this kind, completely unknown until then, were worn by Naskapi boys between the ages of 5 and 15. Smaller than a hunter's robe, it was formed like a whole caribou skin. Painted geometrical decorations represent flowers which assure sun and warmth; lines on the legs resemble simple men's robe patterns. These designs could safely be seen so they were painted on the outside. Photograph by Ray Webber.

11. Mrs. William Katshinak painting an Atikwish with the traditional stick brush and a template, 1962. Ewers compares the technique of Naskapi and Plains Indian painting as follows: "The technique of the Naskapi painting seems to have been very similar to the Plains Indian technique except for the use of specialized brushes [Naskapi] with which two or more parallel lines could be made with one stroke and for the use of fish roe as sizing" (1939:48).

interpreted in many ways. They may, on the one hand, have symbolized caribou (or man, both being synonymous in this area) or more specifically the antlers of this animal. Alternately, they have been interpreted as the "Tree of Life" or "tree" which enabled the shaman to ascend to heaven or descend to the underworld. Instant transition, apparent in all Naskapi symbolic interpretation, is the predominant feature of the double curve; its only constant quality is change. These rhythmic curves—now known to be formed when a body descends into water or ascends through the air, thereby bringing these elements "to life" (Schwenk 1962)—may have been thought to have formed in that instant when the shaman entered the spirit world. The wavelike border of the Speyer robe once more reflects and contains these sacred curves.⁸

Red, the predominant color of all Naskapi painted patterns, usually symbolizes blood, but in some cases is specifically associated with fire or heat. In this instance, heat may be suggested: that which emanates from the shaman as he passes to the other world through the undimensional and timeless interval.

And it is conceivable that the threefold division, evident on the oldest robe, may symbolize the three cosmic zones which only a shaman can penetrate. These rectangular divisions could also be a reflection of the robe's angular shape with all the symbolism this implies. It seems no coincidence that the Tehuelche robe has the same three divisions. The T-shaped endings of the cross on the Speyer robe, with the circle endings in which are placed dots, have a definite skeletal appearance and such configurations were discussed by Schuster (1956-1958:27, Fig. 22). The shape of the pattern on this robe emphasizes the four directions or world quarters, often visually represented on Old Sam's robes and also related in Naskapi myth.



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It is important to note that most ceremonial robes were painted with simple patterns such as those made for the writer. Such magical forms increased with age and spiritual power of the hunter. The robe's power of transformation has already been noted by modern informants: when the Naskapi hunter dons his robe, he becomes caribou and magically attracts his kind. The magical properties of the robe are also reflected in myth, notably when the man or old buck becomes immune to arrows (death) while wearing the robe. Eliade wrote that:

Imitating the gait of an animal or putting on its skin was acquiring a superhuman mode of being because far greater and stronger than himself...we are justified in supposing that this projection into a mythical being the center at once of the existence and renewal of the universe...induced the euphoric experience that, before ending in ecstasy showed the shaman his power and brought him into communion with cosmic life (Eliade 1964:460).

In summary, Eliade stated that :

The shaman's transition to animal, in which he is given a new magical body, was achieved by donning a specific costume and as a super being he was enabled to reestablish the paradisaical situation of mythical times and he knew about this time (Eliade 1964:460).

Nevertheless, a distinction has to be made between a Naskapi hunter and a Naskapi shaman, for Eliade's statement applies completely only to the latter, who is often called Mistapeo or Mistinapeo — Great Man —



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in the extreme northeastern area of the peninsula. Only the shaman could retrace the First Man's Epic Journey to the Lord of the Caribou, the first time undertaken when the people were starving and "animals did not travel." A Naskapi shaman had, therefore, far greater power than the ordinary hunter. Only he could entice the Lord once again to release some of his subjects so the people would not starve. He alone could receive messages from the other world for the whole band. Only he could divine for his people, and significantly, only he could cure the sick.⁹

Although the ceremonial robe itself was not an object specifically conceived and used by a shaman, and the symbols represented on these robes are not executed in the semirealistic style with which items used only by the shaman are decorated, the more elaborately painted Naskapi robes were undoubtedly magical devices of a shaman. At one stage the ceremonial robe becomes a specifically shamanic device. This was sometimes reflected in its rectangular or square shape, symbolizing the people as a whole, and was always apparent in the choice and complexity of its symbols, which were those of the shaman who also used the robe in very special ways in order to aid all his people during particularly stressful times. These special symbols have been discussed and of these the sun symbol will once more be recalled. For the sun's appearance, magically assured by painting it on the robe and displaying it to the rising sun, heralded not only a new day, the sun's return from

the other world, but also symbolized the return of the shaman from his spirit voyage to the land beyond the horizon. Here the shaman follows in the path of the culture hero Tshekabish, who performed his many deeds of transforming the world into its present state and who snared the sun as it rose and finally transformed into it. The birth of Jahabash from the ceremonial robe again reflects world creation, and I noted that it is still part of Naskapi mythology just as it was when Clouston recorded his observations 160 years ago.

The taboos associated with these robes also reflect their sacred function. Only on clear days could the magical skin be worn or displayed. It would be heresy to use the robe on a sunless day for at all times the robe had to be magically linked to the sun. And although some red patterns on the robe represent blood of an animal, the robe could not be soiled with the blood of a slain beast as this would destroy the robe's power which was thereby identified with its spirit.

In essence, then, the robe represents a religious microcosm. By contemplating or donning the robe, the shaman transcended profane space and prepared to enter into contact with the spiritual world. He thereby reestablished a situation once believed to have been universal: he abolished time and entered into a primordial condition. The shaman's sacred robe was his vehicle to the spirit world. His own rebirth, achieved with the robe, was synonymous with the return of the sun, the renewal of the world, the rebirth of his people and, almost certainly, the return of the caribou.

But by the early 1930s, use of the ceremonial robe declined among the Montagnais-Naskapi. An old Naskapi hunter in northern Labrador poignantly voiced the fears of his people in a single sentence: "We are dying, we are the last." Caribou, once so plentiful, had become scarce; the very material of which the robe was made had become unavailable. And the Indians, decimated by white man's diseases, were convinced that there was no longer hope.

Footnotes

¹The Indians of the area call the caribou "deer." The Lucky Deerskin usually had the hair removed and was often trimmed at the edges. As even the trimmings had acquired magical power, they were kept in a bundle in the tent.

²In a letter to the writer (August 23, 1966) John Ewers suggested the following: "You might also consider whether the painted ceremonial robe of the Naskapi in recent years is not a survival of the aboriginal garment in a religious context." To this writer it seems doubtful that the Naskapi ever used this robe instead of a well-cut coat. There are a number of reasons for this. The kind of coat worn by the Naskapi is much like those evident throughout the circumpolar regions, although this is denied by some ethnologists. A well-cut coat, so the writer suggests, was essential when hunting in these latitudes. This subject is complex and cannot be adequately treated here.

³An abbreviated version of Clouston's account of the Mokushan he witnessed is as follows:

In the evening Ushemau made a feast of marrow fat and bear meat . . . Several painted deerskins were put on sticks near the tent . . . the head part of the skin to the east, the fat was placed on clean deerskins between Ushemau and the fire, and covered with deerskins. All the Indians then painted themselves with vermilion. . . Every person was then ordered to keep in the tent and all the holes on the tent carefully closed up. A painted deerskin was then wrapped round a child who could crawl but not walk . . . [and who] was laid outside the door, and its mother began to call it to her. The child was so wrapped that it could only move like an earthworm . . . As soon as the child had got inside the door the Indian began to beat the drum and sing. . . He then laid by the drum, uncovered the fat, which was painted with a circle . . . took the fat in his hands and went three times round the fire with the sun, still keeping his face and the painted part of the fat to the fire. His motion was a sort of dance. The burden of his song was "What think you will be done to my soul" . . . When he had gone thrice round, he put down the fat and went to the east side of the tent, made a hole with his hands. . . and put his mouth to this hole speaking to the morning or sun-rising. . . When the fat had burnt, he took a little bit and put it in the fire, then went round with the fat in his hands and every man had to take a little bit . . . then . . . boy . . . the women and girls. . . No person was allowed to go out of the tent till they had eaten some of the feast. . . None of the feast durst be taken out of the tent (Clouston 1963:36-37).

At Fort Chimo, Lucien M. Turner recorded a Mokushan during which skins of various animals were displayed. Turner noted:

The entrance to the structure faced southeast. On a pole . . . were numbers of skins of various animals—wolves, wolverine, beaver, otter, foxes, and muskrat, together with a number of the finest reindeer skins . . . [Inside the tent] . . . a number of piles of deerskins and several small heaps [were] covered with cloth (Turner 1894:322).

Turner was not permitted to take food out of the tent as this would cause all the deer to desert the vicinity. It is of interest to note that although Turner was permitted to witness this rite, the myths Turner recorded in which the ceremonial robe has an important function were related to him in a manner which shrewdly eliminated reference to the robes.

⁴I am indebted to Kitty Bishop-Glover of the National Museum of Man in Ottawa for additional information on the Jahabash myth.

⁵One Naskapi woman in Davis Inlet, Mrs. Pasteen, well past ninety, insisted on drawing a ceremonial robe on top of a decorated coat she had drawn previously. To her the two garments formed a whole. The lines drawn on the sleeves of a coat representing joint marks are repeated on some less complex ceremonial robes, again indicating the above noted close relationship.

⁶John C. Ewers writing to Ernest Dodge in 1948 noted: "In both the Naskapi and the Plains there are two dimensional stages—a large and a small. Among the decorated Plains robes some of the designs cover as little as one-eighth of an area; others cover three-quarters of the central area" (Ewers 1948).

⁷Edward Rogers noted that ceremonial robes were used in the Mistassini area and he gives the most detailed and precise account available of the preparation of the hides and their use during the second Fall Feast where they were hung outside the lodge (Rogers 1967:31-32). See also Tanner (1979:103,170-171).

⁸John C. Ewers writing to Ernest Dodge in 1948 about the Speyer robe commented: "The robe is of particular interest to me because of its combination of many double curves with a central 'sun symbol' and a border of what I termed in my book, *Plains Indian Painting*, 'interlocking wave design.' These are both common Plains Indian motifs, the 'sun' used as a central figure and the 'interlocking wave' in border designs, as on this specimen. However, the double curve does not appear on Plains specimens" (Ewers 1948).

⁹I have treated shamanic healing previously (Webber 1973-1974).

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Alika Podolinsky Webber has recorded all available Montagnais-Naskapi specimens in more than 30 institutions in Canada, the United States and Europe. From 1960 to the early 1970s, she made 11 field trips to the Quebec-Labrador peninsula on behalf of the National Museum of Man, Ottawa. During this period she also collected several thousand ethnological specimens now in 5 major institutions.

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