

ESKIMO RELIGION: A LOOK AT FOUR TRANSITIONAL PERSONS

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ABSTRACT/RESUME

This paper is concerned with four Alaskan Inuit leaders during a period of rapid, destabilizing change. The author feels that over a thirty year span from 1890 to 1920, these particular individuals were critical for the maintenance of Inuit cultural patterns. In part this was because of a recognition of Christian missionaries, but it was characterized as a creative accommodation by the Inuit to the substantially dysfunctional white contact.

Cet article s'intéresse à 4 leaders Inuit d'Alaska durant une période de changements rapides et déstabilisateurs. L'auteur a le sentiment que, pendant plus de 30 ans (de 1890 à 1920), ces individus critiquaient le maintien des schémas culturels Inuit. Cette attitude était partiellement due à la reconnaissance des missionnaires chrétiens mais elle était aussi caractéristique d'une accommodation créative des Inuit au contact considérablement destructurant des blancs.

During a period of thirty years, roughly from 1890 to 1920, Eskimos of Northwest Alaska made a rapid transition to Christianity, abetted by missionary teachers who followed the commercial expansion of the West to its limits at the arctic edge of the Chuchi Sea. Christianization was markedly facilitated by certain Eskimo leaders, including Maniilaq, Uyagaq, Punginguhk, and Koaliruaq, better known as Egaq. In my judgment these persons demonstrated a creative accommodation by the Eskimo to a generally dysfunctional white contact.

My analysis and conclusions are drawn from research begun a decade ago, which issued in *The Alaska Quaker Documents*, (microfilmed, 1977, available in various libraries with Arctic or Quaker collections), and a monograph, *Tomorrow is Growing Old: Stories of the Quakers in Alaska* (Roberts, 1978). A National Endowment for the Humanities Grant in 1975 supported the gathering of oral history, much of it from persons who were first-generation Christians. Such data complemented existing written documents and Eskimo history. (See the detailed bibliography in Roberts, 1978.)

The Inupiat under consideration occupy ancestral homelands along the shore and inland from Norton and Kotzebue sound, within the Seward Peninsula and the river systems of the Noatak, the Kobuk, and the Selawik. This region is generally considered to be the cradle of Eskimo civilization, with Kikiktagruq (modern Kotzebue) as a major ancient trade center for Siberian, Alaskan, and Canadian Eskimo (Rink, 1875 Giddings, 1952, 1961, 1967; Oswalt, 1967).

Eskimo-white contact began with Vikings in Greenland in 1000 A.D. A Norwegian Lutheran missionary, Hans Egede, renewed contact there in 1721, followed by various Moravian missionaries to Greenland and Labrador. By the time of the American Revolution the church had been planted and was thriving. There is no evidence for direct influence by these Eskimo Christians upon their more numerous Alaskan brothers although indirect influence via trade can be conjectured. In the 1880s the Moravians established missionary activity on the Kuskoquim, among Yupik-speaking Eskimo, naming their headquarters Bethel.

White contact in Alaska began with sporadic Russian trade in the 17th century although evidence for long use of metal implements suggests indirect barter with China. Peter the Great sponsored explorations into the Bering Sea, and by the end of the 18th century the Russian American Company had been chartered. These commercial ventures devastated the southern Eskimo and Aleuts, Unalakleet on the Norton Sound being the northern limits of such enterprise. Exploratory Russian probes to the north continued, highlighted by the visit of a fleet commanded by Otto von Kotzebue in 1816.

English exploration began with James Cook's visit to Sledge Island (near Elim) in 1778 and continued with various expeditions, including that of William Beechey in 1826.

American contact began with adventurers and whalers in the mid-nineteenth century and became an aquatic equivalent to the California Gold Rush. Following its purchase by the United States in 1867 thoughtful Christians became concerned about Alaska's people as well as its fish and fur. Missionaries reached Northern Alaska in the 1880s and 1890s. Among them were the Quakers.

During the period under consideration, 1890-1920, three commercial enterprises formed the white-Eskimo interface: whaling, mining, and reindeer herding. The first was in serious decline; the second rose to fever pitch on the Kobuk and at Nome, then subsided slowly in villages such as Candle and Circle City; the third flourished until the flu of 1918 devastated its leadership and vitiated its momentum. Whaling and gold hunting left a legacy of resource depletion, syphilis, social disruption, and alcohol abuse. Reindeer herding, initiated in reparation, shared with school, village and church in a new stabilizing social order. By the 1930s population decline had been arrested, and slow genocide averted.

MANIILAQ

The Kobuk Eskimo people had been prepared for Christianity through the prophet Maniilaq, stories about whom I have collected from oral and written sources and put into narrative forms (1978, Chapter Six).

Maniilaq was born about 1800 in the rugged south slopes of the Brooks range along the tributaries of the Kobuk (one of which now bears his name). He died about 1890. An inlander, he owned a boat and used to take his family to the trading center at Kikiktagruq. He may well have followed the trade routes southwest to St. Michaels or northeast to Barter Island. It may be surmised that he was an apt learner who gleaned information and insight via trade contacts. He became a renowned and respected leader remembered for his predictions and for his taboo breaking.

"Old Eskimo" story tellers such as Susie Stalking accept the fulfillment of his predictions as vindication of his teachings. Al-

though indirect Christian influence upon him may be inferred, direct Christian influence by missionary or by Biblical instruction is firmly disavowed.

Maniilaq predicted the Noatagmiut would join the coastal Eskimo at Sheshalik to hunt beluga, that iron sleds would ride the sky, boats travel upstream under their own power, and that the new people would come in large numbers--a mixed blessing.

When the miners streamed up the Kobuk in 1898, and aircraft landed on the Kobuk one spring in the 1920s, they said his prophecies were fulfilled. Ambler village grew where he said it would--Kennecott discovered rich copper veins nearby. A predicted double winter, perhaps like one he had experienced in 1816, related to the eruption of the volcano, Tambora, Indonesia, and perhaps, Krakatoa, (1883), has not yet come about.

He used to practice meditating every seventh day sitting under a pole he carried in his boat. At the end of the day he would tell listeners what the heavenly father (ataata) had to say. Maniilaq carried a drum but he was not considered a shaman. He did no healing. He removed fears by reason rather than incantation. His family ignored taboos about skin sewing during fishing season, about putting ashes over food during an eclipse, about eating wild rhubarb with whale meat, and about drinking from the water bucket of a young woman during puberty rituals. He told women they did not need to bear their children in separate snow houses.

Such actions began to break the power of the taboos for many people. He reinforced his actions by good humor and easy laughter. Enraged angatquqs tried to hex him but could not penetrate his charismatic power. He was no cynic. His meditative worship, with its symbolism, made that clear. The sacred presence was preserved within rational dimensions.

He is remembered as a teacher of righteousness. "Trust God," he would say, "love each other," "do not be afraid." Perhaps some predictions were self-fulfilling results of his teachings, as when the Noatagmiut put aside old differences and joined their brothers in sea hunting.

Maniilaq made a religious accommodation of reason to the new order of things intuited or observed. He provided a Kobuk version of logos theology.

Like a Moses or a Socrates he lifted the universal above the particular, the god of all above tribal deity. In this sense he affirmed ancient Eskimo traditions about prophets of the past to whom the divine had revealed a pattern for accommodation to change. A divine messenger had instructed Ekeuhnck, the first Eskimo, how to prepare for an earth turned cold after an extended eclipse. A voice had told Beeueoak to prepare a raft to survive flooding, the second great disaster. After the double winter and starvation--the third crisis--two women, Nasaruhk and Napauruhk, by listening to divine instructions, not only preserved the lives of their granddaughter and son, respectively, but taught them the teachings of the forefathers until they could marry, beget children, and perpetuate the people.

Wisdom and imagination were the divine gifts for those who enabled Inupiat to accommodate to change, according to Eskimo chronicles. (Oguilluk, 1973). For the Kobuk story-tellers, Maniilaq provided leadership of this sort in time of white contact.

Quaker church leaders, Eskimo and white, recognized and respected Maniilaq's theodicy and built upon it. As a tribute to his vision the Northwest Alaska Native Association has named a non-profit educational subsidiary after the old seer who inspired in them confident accommodation to change brought by white contact.

PUNGINGUHK

In contrast to centuries old Eskimo traditions, white whalers secured their catch without benefit of propitiating ritual or religious respect. This threatened the priestly class who had to cope with this annual display of awesome and irreligious power. Understandable was their fury at the prophet Maniilaq.

One of these angatquqs was Punginguhk. Stories about him have been preserved by the Eskimo historian Oquilluk, whose parents and grandparents were introduced to Christianity at Kotzebue by the Quaker mission. The year this future historian was born, 1896, the U. S. Cutter Bear stopped at Pt. Clarence on its annual trip to Barrow. Punginguhk had been a trouble maker for the whalers who waited in the protected bay for the ice to clear for their journey to whaling grounds further north. Psychic shenanigans had gotten

the shaman into trouble over the last decade. So the officers nabbed Punginguhk and put him in leg irons in the cabin. The wily psychi-magician escaped, however, and ran around the ship defying the sailors to shoot him. Then in a negotiating mood he proposed a deal: "You cut off my head first, then I will cut off yours." The nervous officer refused, whereupon Punginguhk ran around the deck holding his head in his hands. Then he made the captain's knife chase its owner into his own cabin, where the instrument was discovered lying on the table. At this point the officers sent the angatquq back to shore, and headed north, glad to be rid of this perplexing business. (I was unable to corroborate these stories from the log of the Bear.)

Reports of such actions are not uncommon. Shamanistic religion is a blend of psychic phenomena, magic, and religious ritual. There are accounts of angatquqs passing through cracks of the earth, images of ascent, astral projections, many moon visits, and accounts of angatquqs leaving the body lying lifeless before the devotees while they placated the spirits and brought back good fortune in hunting. (The modern cult of Eckancar utilizes the ancient practices of soul-travel and perhaps soul-battle.)

There is a sequel to this Punginguhk narrative. During the winter following this episode, the old shaman's wife made a parka, mukluks, warm mittens and sealskin pants for the captain. When he returned the next year not only did he receive these gifts, but he saw a crowd on the beach, gathered about Punginguhk, who was telling them about Jesus. To say the least the captain was surprised. Even more so when at the conclusion of the talk the old wizard motioned the captain to kneel down and to pray with him! Then and there the old shaman witnessed how he had become a Christian. He would do no more witch-doctoring, he said, which was a good thing for Eskimo and white. With such power, he said, angatquqs would only harass their people with evil spirits, "I had you in my power last year," he reminded the captain, "and my spirits wanted to kill all of you." But I said no, I made up my mind to spare your lives. At this the captain mumbled something about being grateful and hoping the shaman would find his reward in heaven.

Our assessment of this narrative is twofold, relating to the nature of the psychic phenomena reported, and the symbolics of transition which is a main feature of the story itself. According to

one point of view, the story constitutes a fanciful rationalization of a doomed religion, what was once beautiful poetry, music and religious ritual is treated as devil worship. It is a way of justifying loss (e.g. Senungetuk, 1971).

To treat such psychic phenomena either as magic or as therapeutic fantasy is inadequate, in my judgment. As Eliade has pointed out, acculturation only modifies the primordial phenomena that "belongs to man as such." Man is always grasping for the world as a holy reality. The arctic shaman perfected ecstatic technique and brought it to the highest degree of integration, Eliade believes. (Eliade, 1964. See also Rink, 1875). The whole story, not just part of it, relates to a world view.

Psychic elements aside, the story is a fascinating myth of transition. The Eskimo accepts the Christian revelation, but he still maintains his own destiny, his sense of mastery. He finds in the Christian doctrine of the Holy Spirit a more satisfactory psychic power than what his own tradition provided. He finds a divine force greater than that demonic power they had witnessed in white whaling.

Punginguhk chose a Christian doctrine of a Holy Spirit emphasizing a power to love, to forgive, to reject dominance. With dramatic Eskimo indirection, the story teaches about Christ's "new and living way." It teaches about treasure hidden in the white man's trading goods.

This psychic accommodation acknowledged moral limits to participation in the "powers". It redirected Spirit from animist to rational casuality. It acknowledged an incarnational center to spirit. It transmuted elitist ecstasy into egalitarian Spirit-leadings. It directed spiritual power toward love rather than hate. These are characteristics of Eskimo Christianity today.

UYAGAQ

In 1896 the cutter Bear left Port Clarence without the shaman Punginguhk. But it carried Uyagaq and Ugalik (David Johnson), his white friend, from the Swedish mission at Unalakleet. Sources for the life of this important transitional figure include Quaker and Swedish Conversant church diaries and documents, stories and

correspondence and interviews with Emily Ivanoff Brown, Emma Brown, Richard Jones (Nuvagaq), Mary Curtis and others.

A Kobuk boy, Uyagaq came into the protective custody of Axel Karlson at Unalakleet in 1888 when his father was murdered while enroute to St. Michael's for trade. The Swedish missionary had begun mission work only a year before. The boy became invaluable to him, first as a sled-driver, and then as an interpreter. Uyagaq had a quick mind, becoming fluent in both English and Inupik. He readily accepted Christianity from his protector and mentor and by the age of seventeen had become an effective preacher to his own people.

Sometimes with another convert, Stephen Ivanoff, and later with his wife, Keketuk, and his family, he made long dogsled trips throughout the camps and villages of the region. From 1893 until he died in 1930 he evangelized widely, especially in the 1890s before others assumed Christianizing tasks. On the trip which brought him to Kikiktagruq in the summer of 1896 he had visited St. Laurence Island, Cape Prince of Wales, Siberia, and the settlements of the Noatak and Selawik rivers. The trade fair at Kikiktagruq provided the largest aggregation; he preached to thousands. One of the favorite Scripture verses for this young Kobuk trader was Proverbs 23:23, "Buy wisdom and sell it not."

For him and for his eager hearers, the Gospel was wisdom, it was good news, it was release from the bondage of a priest-ridden old religion and from exploitation by adventurers and traders. In the old days, out of the silence the shaman used to summon the spirits to help in the hunt or to overcome illness. He would murmur, "the way is ready for me; the way opens before me," and the audience would answer in chorus "let it be so!" (Eliade, 1964). In the new day of 1896 with the miners already polluting the Kugruq and the Kiwalik and making prostitutes out of Eskimo girls, with whaling in shambles and the caribou driven off, the way of wisdom seemed to be Christianity and the reindeer.

No longer would umialik and the angatquq signify the way, but rather the interpreter, the reindeer herder, and the preacher. Henceforth the rhythms of commerce and religion would continue in "gospel tripping" as well as in sea and land hunting. In these ways Inuit community would be reinforced, at least before sectarianism and secularity produced a new crisis of leadership within the Christian villages.

Uyagaq's preaching mission to Kikiktagruq bore other results. The people who gathered there each summer from the Kobuk valley and along the shores north toward Point Hope and south to the mines of Circle City, wanted to know more about Christianity. They knew of missionary teachers elsewhere which Sheldon Jackson's contract system provided. They asked the commissioner for teachers. Funds were uncertain, but he said he would try. Perhaps by the charming Quaker school teacher at Douglas Island in S. E. Alaska, Ann Hunnicutt, would be interested.

In August, before they dispersed to their inland and coastal homes, an Eskimo council decided to do their own recruiting. So Uyagaq and a few others went by umiak to Pt. Clarence some two hundred miles away where they caught an ocean going vessel another two thousand miles to Douglas Island. Ann Hunnicutt was not there at the time but Quaker missionary-doctor, Charles Replogle, was. He received their visit as a "Macedonian call" and forthwith headed for California to solicit support for this new missionary endeavor. That is why of the four thousand Kobuk Eskimos about 2500 of them today count themselves Quaker.

Uyagaq's influence is freely acknowledged both within the Covenant church around Unalakleet and the Friends Churches in the Kotzebue area. He exemplified the new leadership: the traveling evangelist. His rhetoric gave oral discourse new style and new content. He articulated a new theology to replace the old. He provided transition to the new umialiks, the bilingual reindeer men and women, the ones who made practical accommodation to the new era.

RUTH EGAQ

The final transitional person is Koalirug, or Rath who married Egaq. Her story is gleaned from an account first published in 1924, entitled "Ruth Egaq, Eskimo" by Martha Hunnicutt; other details have been provided orally and in writing by Ruth Outwater, granddaughter, and by Alaska Mission Documents.

Ruth was born about the same time as Uyagaq, 1876. When her father, an influential shaman, became ill, medicine men prescribed various treatments. They warned that if any member of the family braided anything, hair, or grass, for example, the father would die.

Koalirug was a dutiful little girl, but on the beach one day she forgot and began to braid grass into a basket. Her father died. Why should a worthless girl breathe the air her important father should have had, they said. She was abandoned. A camp waif, she eked out an existence like an unloved dog. After puberty the young men abused her sexually. One was Egaq, son of a Kingimiut umialik, whose family for centuries had lived along the southern deltas and river systems of Kotzebue sound gathering beaver and red fox fur.

Gradually Egaq's lust changed to pity and then to love. He married her, social disgrace notwithstanding. Their first child died. The second they "threw away" because it was sick. Egaq and Koalirug decided that if another baby came they wouldn't throw it away. (If a baby died everyone had to get new clothes and they didn't want to go through with these taboos again.) The young couple heard rumors about different religious ways and Egaq had a hopeful vision from a heavenly messenger. These intimations of new religious truth were confirmed by the direct preaching of Uyagaq. Koalirug and Egaq threw away their idols and determined to live Jesus' way. But Egaq held on to his divining stick--it helped in deciding things, until they went to Unalakleet and learned from the Ivanoff family more about Christianity. Then Egaq threw away his final fetish and deliberately broke as many taboos as possible to test the new faith.

Thus was launched the Egaq Christian family, important especially in the Buckland to Denbigh areas. The daughter, Lily, whom they had decided not to throw away, married a John Savok whose grandfather had been an outstanding angatquq. Today the Egaq and Savok families are church leaders in Anchorage and Fairbanks, as well as in various villages.

After passing through a period of extreme legalism, Ruth became a leader in the Eskimo church. She and her family developed picture writing to foster better comprehension of Christianity. When the white missionaries came to the Buckland area she became a teacherminister with them.

In the years following World War I, American protestantism polarized into what were dubbed "modernists" and "fundamentalists." The classical orthodoxy of the early Quaker mission was similarly separated although fundamentalism dominated. Spirituality

narrowed to pietistic concerns. Reindeer herding, hard hit by changing economics anyway, suffered, as did the school systems. Some missionaries considered these to be worldly tasks. The old ways of the Eskimo were treated as "devil worship." Sabbath observances became so strict Eskimo families sometimes waited to the stroke of midnight to go chop needed firewood, or let smelt runs go by unnetted until too late.

Although the Egaqs themselves had reason to distrust priestcraft, they cherished their Eskimo culture, and they worried about new forms of ecclesiological dominance. Ruth said there were two kinds of dances in the old days. One called up demonic forces. The other expressed joyful feelings--like Miriam in the Old Testament.

Ruth Egaq thought the missionaries did not always understand the range of good and bad in the old ceremonies. Her quiet challenge to a prevailing missionary mood stabilized the church, lessened second-generation legalism, recovered contextual principles of church growth, and reinforced the Quaker and Eskimo acceptance of both men and women in positions of church leadership.

With a devastated reindeer economy in the 1930s, husband and wife pastoral leadership became a characteristic of the Kobuk Eskimo people. The pastors shared the subsistence life of their people. Often pastors' cabins were erected near the meetinghouses which sprang up in the Quaker villages. Through these strong families cultural accommodation occurred.

The tradition of the strong and able woman goes back into Eskimo history, especially to Ingnukhunuk, following the third crisis, whose extraordinary physical prowess was coupled with moral leadership. Ruth Egaq is remembered for her spiritual strength.

CONCLUSION

I conclude by recalling an experience in Pauline Harvey's cabin on the Kobuk River. Her old mother, Anousuq, sat on a caribou rug telling stories for her daughter to translate. During this process I noticed how Harvey, the minister-linguist, had picked up my padded coat and kept her fingers busy tightening the drawstring more effectively to protect against the wind. It was symbolic. Vigilant adaptation marks a culture which lives in an environment with narrow margins of error.

In the age of oil the Eskimo faces a new crisis in survival, but this time more in common with the other cultures of the world. Maniilaq, Punginguhk, Uyagaq and Egaq demonstrated creative accommodation in the face of generally dysfunctional white contact. On the basis of such leadership in the past the Inupiat seem likely to survive and to maintain ethnic identity.

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