

**SPIRITS IN THE SNOWHOUSE: THE INUIT  
ANGAKOK (SHAMAN) IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE**

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ABSTRACT/RESUME

A number of children's books have been written using Inuit themes, and particularly themes involving the *angakok*, or shaman. The author reviews three of these in an examination of the possibilities of non-Inuit writers adequately communicating Inuit concepts. He concludes that Western literary traditions may preclude any proper presentation of another culture.

Un bon nombre de livres d'enfants a été écrit sur les Inuits et particulièrement sur des thèmes qui touchent *angakok* ou shaman. L'auteur en revoit trois de ces derniers dans une examination de possibilité de non-Inuit écrivain adequat à communiquer les concepts Inuit. Il conclut que la littérature traditionnelle de l'ouest, est l'introduction de n'importe queue présentation d'une autre culture.

The angakok, or shaman, was the central figure of the spiritual life of the traditional Inuit. A central figure in many major ceremonies, he foretold weather patterns and movements of game animals, cured illness, retrieved lost or stolen souls, and travelled to the moon and to the bottom of the sea, conversing there with major spiritual beings. An unusual birth, childhood illness, or psychic disorder often signalled his possession of shamanic powers, and a long, arduous training was generally necessary before he came into full control of these powers. Physical ordeals, animal attacks, periods of solitary meditation, and apprenticeship to an older shaman were among the elements of his quest for his vocation. One of his major activities centered on public performance. Seated in the darkened communal house before members of the community, he achieved a state of ecstasy in which, uttering strange animal and spirit sounds, he travelled out of his body into strange places to find answers to questions which affected his people. In fact, unique though he was in his village, his role was profoundly social. In the tenuous, uncertain world of the Arctic, he helped to create or maintain what Mircea Eliade has called "the psychic integrity of the community" (Eliade, 1964:508). This he did by achieving access to "a region of the sacred inaccessible to other members of the community" (Ibid:7).

Central though the angakok was, children's writers attempting to portray traditional Inuit life have had great difficulty in presenting his role accurately and sympathetically. Not only is shamanic material beyond the intellectual comprehension of most children, it relates to an holistic view of reality which is almost totally foreign to people whose culture has been conditioned by the tenets of Greek philosophy, Christian theology, and scientific empiricism. Two types of stories have generally resulted: the author presents characters as being, except for differences in habitat and physical features, just like Western readers or, at least, like characters in Western children's books; or he presents the Inuit world as being, because of its cultural or religious differences, inferior and foolish, filled with superstition and error. In the pages that follow, I shall examine a children's collection of traditional Inuit stories and a novel, noticing how closely they relate both to the reality of Inuit shamanism and to the patterns of children's literature just noted.

Although Charles Gillham, the author of *Beyond the Clapping Mountains* (1943) and *Medicine Men of Hooper Bay* (1955), spent eight years as a biologist working with the Alaskan Eskimos, a careful examination of both books suggests that the greatest influence on them was a belief that he must shape his retelling of traditional stories to fit the literary backgrounds of his Western readers. Rather than expose them to beliefs and facts beyond their experience, he has reworked his materials to make the stories as comfortably familiar as possible.

Gillham's familiarization process is revealed in the subtitle of the English edition of *Medicine Men of Hooper Bay - The Eskimo's Arabian Nights* - and in his "Introduction" to *Beyond the Clapping Mountains*: "They are a combination of Aesop's fables and Mother Goose rhymes of the Eskimo" (1943:xiv).

Within the texts of the stories we find such phrases as "the sea held mysterious goblins" (1955:9), "in his hand he held a magic wand" (Ibid:14), and "the orphan children often saw Brownies" (Ibid:63). Moreover, at the conclusion of nearly all of the stories are found short, explicit morals such as those found in most European fables: for example, "We should remember, as do the Eskimo people, that it is not good to be sleepy all the time and never to do one's work" (Ibid:22).

What these examples reveal is not merely a Europeanization of Gillham's materials, but, more important, a violation of the spirit, purpose, and content of Eskimo stories. By the late nineteenth century, much traditional European oral material had been far removed from its sources and was often presented in print forms which reflected adult viewpoints on the nature and purpose of children's reading materials. Although Inuit stories often contained material designed for the implicit cultural conditioning of children who heard them, myths and legends were not generally seen as fiction, but as true ancient history, something important which happened long ago. As such, they were an integral part of the culture, and they reflected Inuit belief in the vital relationships between the human, animal, inanimate, and spiritual elements of the world. Brownies and goblins had, by the time of Gillham's writing become safe, fictional aspects of the fantasy world of the nursery; but the corresponding beings of Inuit legend never had. As a starting point, we may then say that Gillham's approach demeans and essentially secularizes or profanes what was sacred literature. His position is made emphatic in his statement: "No doubt many of their yarns were based on imagination only" (Ibid:10-11). The word yarn suggests a tall tale, a patently untrue one; the word imagination is not being used in the Coleridgean sense of vision, but in the more common one of make-believe.

The title *Medicine Men of Hooper Bay* is, in a sense, twice removed from the subject: *medicine man* is a general term which, like *witch doctor*, encompasses a variety of religious practitioners; shaman is the correct English term; angakok is the generally used Inuit term, *tungalik* is widely used in Alaska. Moreover, in his introduction, the author casts doubt on the validity of the practices of these people he calls medicine men:

They had no doctors to care for their ills and injuries. They had no church to guide them. Instead, they had medicine men or shamans, who, they believed, were all powerful. These men were supposed to perform miracles in healing. The fresh skin of a rabbit might be applied as a poultice to an infection. Our doctors tell us that this is very bad (Ibid:9).

The first two sentences are incorrect. The shamans were doctors, and, although they did not have church organizations or buildings, they had, especially in the land of which Gillham writes, carefully organized cycles of ritual religious observances. The phrases *they believed* and *were supposed* suggest the inefficacy of shamanistic acts. The final sentence uses modern, "scientific" medicine

to discredit the old medical practices. From the beginning of the book, a tone is set which tends to diminish the cultural importance of the stories which follow.

In the book's final story, "The Festival for the Seals," Gillham presents a tale based on one of the most important annual ceremonies of the Bering Straits Eskimos, the Bladder Festival. Led by the shaman, this observance embodies a central belief of the Eskimo hunters: "All those perils [of hunting] arise from the fact that we, hunting animals as we do, live by slaying other souls" (Rasmussen, 1929:110). During the year the bladders of slain seals were saved. During the festival, the shaman

sang a song, inflated each bladder, and hung it in the *qasgiq*. The festival amused and pleased the shades of the animals, and the bladders were returned to the sea through a hole in the ice. The shades of the animals swam far out to sea where they entered the bodies of unborn animals of their kind. They thus became reincarnated, rendering the game plentiful the following year. If the shades were pleased with the manner in which they had been treated by a hunter, they would not be afraid to meet him again, and they would permit him to approach and kill them without any trouble (Fitzhugh and Kaplan, 1982:200).

Gillham begins his story by stating that the people held the festival "in honor of the seals whom they liked so much" (1955:130), and that "it would always bring good luck" (Ibid:130). The spiritual dimension is missing in this account; the idea of the seals possessing inua, or souls, is absent. The inflated bladders are referred to as "like little white toy balloons" (Ibid:131). In fact, gathered together, "they would have looked just like a bunch of balloons that men carry to sell at fairs and in parks" (Ibid:134). Boys vying to hold these bladders were said to be having "quite a game" (Ibid:132). After this exposition, Gillham describes how the Medicine Man took a little boy, Natto, with him to see the passage of the bladders through the sea. The journey seems more like a guide tour through a modern day theme park, complete with trained animal acts. At the end, the boy joyfully rejoins his mother, and the book concludes with this "moral", certainly one not inherent in the ceremony itself: "It is always good to get home again after being gone a very long time. The best person in all the world to be with is one's mother" (Ibid:142). The effect of this story and its conclusion is to trivialize a sacred ceremony and, by extension, the awesome spiritual mysteries that all of the stories in the book should have embodied.

## II

Jeanie Kortum's novel *Ghost Vision* (1983) is the story of a twelve year old Greenland boy's discovery of his shamanic vocation. Travelling with his father to a summer tent camp, Panipaq experiences a series of visions which he

cannot understand. At the camp, he is unable to shoot his first seal or catch hawks with the other children, and he displeases his father when he suggests that they leave small meat offerings to thank the spirits. Later, he meets old Inuk, a shaman, who tells him the meanings of the visions and explains to him that the boy is an angakok. Travelling out of his body, Panipaq travels to the bottom of the sea where he meets Neqivik, mother of the sea mammals, and atones for his father's misdeeds. When he reports his experiences to the awe-struck members of the tent camp, the father angrily decides to take him home, ignoring the warnings of impending storms. Panipaq falls through the broken ice, is rescued by Neqivik, and is able to reconcile his father to his shamanic powers and the old ways, before returning to his home, mother, and a new baby brother.

This novel attempts to integrate several elements: the apprenticeship of a boy angakok, the conflicts between new and old ways and between a growing boy and his father, the supernatural elements of high fantasy, the messages of modern ecology, and the familiar novelistic structure of the summer vacation. It is a difficult task and is only partially successful. Both the attempt and the results illustrate the problems inherent in writing a modern Western children's novel about a non-Western culture.

"What I did on my summer vacation" is not only a favorite September essay topic for teachers at all levels, but also a narrative structure for many children's novels. Relatively ordinary children travel away from familiar surroundings to experience events which provide them with opportunities for character growth and new understandings. At the end of the summer they return changed people, maturer, wiser, and more confident of themselves. One thinks, for example, of William Mayne's *The Blue Boat* (1960), Alan Garner's *Owl Service* (1981b), and Virginia Hamilton's *Zeely* (1978).

*Ghost Vision* follows this pattern. Panipaq lives in a typical Greenland Inuit town. As the novel begins, "He was so excited now because he and his father were going to spend the summer living with his cousins in Siorapaluk, an Inuit village even farther to the north, close to the very top of the world . . . Oh, I can hardly wait, thought Panipaq as he ran to help his father" (Kortum, 1983:2). Although he worries about missing his mother, his desire of maintaining his manliness prevents his showing his emotions. The novel ends with a joyous family reunion. The last sentence of the book says: "When he reached his mother he hugged her for a very long time" (Ibid:143). Although he has acquired shamanic powers, he is a boy joyously returning home after his summer vacation.

Kortum is fairly accurate in the presentation of the stages by which Panipaq discovers his vocation: his visions, the illness which follows them, the advice of a wise old shaman, and the astral travelling to the bottom of the sea. However, in order to present this progress, she resorts to standard novelistic narrative devices. The conflict of the book is between the boy and his father. At first, he wants to be like his father, a good hunter, and when he cannot fulfill his father's expectations he is upset. On the other hand, he becomes increasingly aware of his uniqueness, and he struggles against it. Gradually he understands

and accepts his vocation:

For a long time - he couldn't remember exactly how long - he had felt different from other people . . . He had something important to do, and it had something to do with being on the outside (Ibid :85-6).

What is important to notice here is the framework within which Panipaq's growing awareness is presented. Although shamans were generally good hunters themselves, here hunting is seen as opposed to the boy's shamanism; the conflict thus becomes one between the growing boy and his father, between two people holding diametrically opposed opinions or beliefs. Such conflicts are those of which novels, particularly novels about adolescents and parents, are made. Shamanic literature does not contain them; for the shaman, the struggles would not have been with others, but with himself, as he strove to be worthy of a calling which he had no choice but to accept.

As we have seen, the shamanic vision was holistic; the angakok in his ecstatic trance saw relationships between all elements of his world and helped his people more toward that realization and the sense of fulfillment it provided. However, the wisdom that Panipaq acquires, while it is unifying, sounds far more like a modern ecological discovery; it lacks the intense spiritual quality of traditional visions:

There was something he could offer Neqivik, there was a purpose to the strange ideas that had kept him apart from other people. Standing in that magic igloo at the bottom of the sea, he began to understand that when he stood alone on a mountain, holding a feeling, hearing whispers from the mist - those were the moments when he most belonged to Neqivak. For those were the moments when he most understood the net. The net! Animals, humans, fish, birds, plants, insects: the strand of each creature's life woven into the net. Each life connected with another, serving, feeding, taking and giving back, balancing all of earth's different needs (Ibid: 102-3).

Kortum's greatest difficulty comes in her attempts to communicate the nature of Panipaq's spiritual experiences. She seems to feel that she must distinguish sharply between the physical and spiritual worlds. By doing this, she suggests Panipaq's mystification and fear on experiencing his visions. It is as if, during the opening chapters, there are two mutually exclusive worlds and the spiritual world is threatening to break into or to carry the boy from the physical one. As Panipaq is chasing after his father's sled, a white mist surrounds him:

A heavy silence covered everything, a silence that held secrets. As Panipaq listened and looked, a ghostly shadow seemed to fall over the silence, a veil of another world (Ibid:7).

Whenever Panipaq is about to experience another vision, this mist reappears and a shift into another dimension takes place. When the crisis reaches its climax, a rent appears between the two realms:

Suddenly his eyes were caught, riveted on one spot along the Horizon where a great ragged hole had torn the smooth seam. Darkness stretched beyond the hole, and the sky no longer sagged close to the ice. Whatever had been pressing against the other side had found a way in! (Ibid:73)

This is powerful writing; but it is writing from within a Western fantasy tradition that includes Alan Garner's *Elidor* (1981a), William Mayne's *A Game of Dark* (1971), and Susan Cooper's *The Dark is Rising* (1973). This tradition is the creation of a culture which separates the physical and spiritual world. For the Inuit, forces such as those Kortum is describing existed within the world; the physical universe was filled with spiritual powers; spirits, men, and animals lived in the same cosmos.

### III

Our survey of these two books has indicated the great difficulty of creating children's stories about foreign cultures. Both authors have fallen into the same trap; they have used literary structures which implicitly reflect the beliefs of their own Western culture to depict the spiritual beliefs of Inuit culture. Gillham ends up by demeaning the depicted culture and, in a sense, condescending to his audience, refusing to grant that it may have the ability to understand cultural points of view different from its own. Kortum writes with both knowledge of and respect for Greenland Inuit ways. However, she is ultimately unable to escape from the structural patterns of Western children's high fantasy, with the result that her work falls short of being a convincing portrait of an apprentice Inuit angakok. Perhaps the fault of both writers lies not merely within themselves, but within the literary tradition from which they write. Perhaps because the Western literary tradition is essentially a product of patterns of thought which have dominated European life for so long, it can never be an appropriate vehicle for presenting any other culture.

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