



From Shamans to Missionaries: The Popular Religiosity of the Inupiaq Eskimo

LARRY JORGENSON

Brevig Memorial Lutheran Church, Brevig Mission, Alaska

I. THE SHAMAN: SETTING THE SCENE

I had been hunting grouse northwest from the mission station and in the dusk was gradually making my way homeward. While yet a couple of miles out I saw four large bonfires arranged in a quadrangle. The fires were approximately twenty-five feet apart. As I drew closer to observe what this really was, I saw four shadowy figures leap out from the tundra and hide themselves. From out of the space between the fires a low moaning sound was heard. There lay the country's most powerful witch doctor writhing and moaning.¹

Thus began, in 1894, missionary Tollef Larson Brevig's fight against the shamanism of Alaska's Seward Peninsula. Viewing shamanism as demon worship and "Eskimo superstition," Brevig set out to break what he considered the power of darkness and evil, and to replace the hopelessness he saw with faith in the Christian gospel. The Lutheran Brevig found an ally against the shamans in the Roman Catholic Bellarmine La Fortune who, for his part, knew them to have "intercourse with his satanic majesty" and to be "unscrupulous charlatans."

Nearly one hundred years later the Seward Peninsula no longer serves as home for what Brevig described as "fantastic [ceremonies] consisting of the beating of drums, much howling, and wild dancing, together with the burning of incense."² Instances of shaman-related activities are attested by nineteenth-century seamen

¹The quotation is taken from the records of T. L. Brevig, pioneer missionary to Alaska, as edited and translated by J. Walter Johnshoy: *Apaurak in Alaska: Social Pioneering among the Eskimos* (Philadelphia: Dorrance, 1944) 53.

²*Ibid.*, 54.

and are found in ships' logs well into the twentieth century, but, as elsewhere in the Arctic, shamanism *seems* to have disappeared.

So why discuss shamans at all? Joseph Campbell concerns himself with Arctic shamans because of their relation to mythology—not just what he calls "primitive mythology" but also today's "creative mythology." Campbell speaks of a "deep psychological cleavage separating the tough-minded 'honest hunters' from their feared yet indispensable tender-minded shamans." For him, past shamans reflect types appearing throughout human history, examination of which helps

us to understand present functions of mythology.³

Others are drawn to the discussion by their interest in its relation to the rapid transition of Arctic culture. Missionaries, some say, offered a gospel of grace that drew an entire population from old ways; others claim that the Inupiaq Eskimo of this region grew to resent the shamans' considerable economic power, and that Christian preachers dealt a *coup de grace* by throwing the shamans out of missionary compounds. Some point to the community's loss of the *kazgi*—the ceremonial house that served as the focal point of the shamans' activity. Those who know the history of Alaskan natives occasionally refer to the disastrous epidemics of measles, tuberculosis, influenza, and substance-abuse that have ravaged tradition in general and traditional religion in particular.

Occasionally a writer will suggest that shamanism has gone underground or that it might one day enjoy a resurgence. The possibility is raised of anonymous shamanism, with shamans currently active in all but name, or of what we will call "Christian shamanism." From the pages of medieval church history we learn that the great age of saints in northern Europe had close connections to the conversion of shamans there. More recent history also offers such examples of conversion. Regarding the Inuit of the Canadian north Richard G. Condon observes:

at present there are no practicing shamans in the community, although a few of the older residents are purported to have once been powerful shamans. Oddly enough, many of these shamans were among the first to be converted to the new faith brought by Anglican and Roman Catholic missionaries.⁴

A pattern emerges in the Arctic by which shamans became Christian leaders.

A third reason for interest in shamans has to do with the question they invite about the popular religiosity of the Arctic. Who exactly were the shamans? Has their function ceased to exist, or has it somehow continued? Did the former missionary polemic against the shamans really affect the Inupiaq world picture? What has been the influence of shamanism on Inupiaq religiosity both in the period of missionary contact and yet today? Does the Christian church offer a sort of *kazgi* to Christian shamans?

II. WHO WAS THE SHAMAN?

Sources on shamanism among the Seward Peninsula's Inupiaq require careful handling. Explorers, traders, whalers, missionaries, and teachers suffered from ethnocentrism or, at the very least, severe culture shock. They applied terms like

³See Joseph Campbell, *Historical Atlas of World Mythology*, vol. 1, *The Way of the Animal Powers* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), and *The Masks of God*, vol. 1, *Primitive Mythology* (New York: Penguin, 1987) 461-472.

⁴Richard G. Condon, *Inuit Youth: Growth and Change in the Canadian Arctic* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University, 1987) 131.

demon worship and superstition to complexities they barely observed and seldom understood. Their accounts do offer some clues about the character of Inupiaq shamanism at the dawn of the twentieth century but need to be balanced by the insights of early ethnology, contemporary

sociology, and history of religions. Inupiaq lore also offers its own image of shamans. Those *kazgi* stories, however, have to be interpreted from their pedagogical context, presented as they are not as examples of Arctic journalism but of corrective advice. Moreover, recent attempts to preserve Inupiaq oral history have relied on native people who now share the anti-shaman bias of the missionaries.

Nevertheless, we can still gain enough of a picture to assert the importance of the shaman to the community. Brevig, La Fortune, and other immigrants to northwest Alaska saw shamans as parasites, con artists, or manipulators from whose clutches missionaries merely freed the native population and thereby gained respect for the veritable war waged on their behalf. Lost in this crude and romantic analysis was the distinction between what Mircea Eliade calls good shamanism and bad shamanism, i.e., between shamanism that serves community and shamanism that turns against community.⁵

In fact, despite this lingering bad press, the shamans' positive social role which those like Brevig and La Fortune had either too little time or too limited a vision to recognize is still to be glimpsed in the available sources. The oral history of northwest Alaska maintains a scant tradition of the good shaman. From Kotzebue comes the story of Qaaraq,

a man of few words, true, humble, and kind, he was still capable of great performances in helping his people. In the past his instructions, given wisely, were obeyed without questions. He was very good-looking, not yet thirty years old. And he was already a full-fledged shaman, not a self-appointed one.

The old people at Teller speak of shamans who spent much of their time in the *kazgi* helping others. "Good shamans," they say, "always helped people when they had trouble." At Wales a shaman "kept watch for many days on top of the mountain, and the grateful people kept him furnished with food and water...they put up a feast and a dance in his honor."

One person who has studied the available sources, Wendell H. Oswalt, makes the same distinction as Eliade:

the most successful shamans...were able to convince villagers of their power over the years. A shaman suspected of employing his abilities to harm people in his own community might be killed by common consent.

Shamans, according to Oswalt, served the community *by common consent* and could, in the process, accumulate wealth and its associated power.⁶

Daniel Merkur borrows Åke Hultkrantz's definition of shamanism and verifies it through his investigation of Arctic sources. That definition holds the shaman to be "a social functionary who, with the help of guardian spirits, attains ecstasy in order to create a rapport with the supernatural world on behalf of his [or her] group members." Hultkrantz saw the four critical elements of shamanism to include: the shaman as an actor on behalf of a human group; the ideological premise,

⁵Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (New York: Bollingen Foundation, 1964).

⁶Wendell H. Oswalt, *Alaskan Eskimos* (Scranton, PA: Chandler, 1967) 218-225.

or the supernatural world and contacts with it; the inspiration granted by helping spirits; and the extraordinary ecstatic experiences of the shaman.⁷

Another authority on shamanism, Kurt H. Vitt, distinguishes faithful shamans from unfaithful ones—shamans true to shamanistic principles from shamans who betray those same principles. Simply stated, shamanistic principles relate to a ministry in opposition to the powers of evil. The shaman could carry out his or her ministry in the field of education—supporting family education as well as the influence of elders—or in the field of healing. That ministry often entailed a religious leadership for the good of the community and for the good of suffering members of that community.

The writings of former missionaries on shamanism posited a gulf between shamanism and community, alleging chicanery. Some anthropological treatments, meanwhile, distinguish between the shaman and non-shaman on the basis of whether or not the subject has had ecstatic experiences or extraordinary encounters with the numinous. Such a distinction is questioned by Campbell, who sees shamans as special mainly in the quality of their relationship to myth. Oswalt also questions its validity, suggesting that shamans shared with other people a competency in extrasensory matters; the shamans were only better versed and more competent. Merkur considers the distinction inappropriate for Arctic people, since what he calls “laity” had ecstatic experiences and encounters too. Of much greater significance for him are the shaman’s social role and the possession of helping spirits. For Merkur, in fact, Inupiaq synonyms for shaman (*angatkuk*; plural, *angatkuk*) hint at a critical difference between the shaman and the laity.⁹ Throughout much of the Arctic the word *tunerak*—those furnished with helping spirits—means about the same thing.

So who was the shaman? Many possible answers cluster in the English term “shaman” and even the Inupiaq term *angatkuk*. There were good shamans, faithful to shamanistic principles, exercising ministries of education, healing, and religious leadership on behalf of their social group. There were also bad shamans who betrayed the social group.

III. INUA: SPIRIT WORLD OF THE INUPIAQ¹⁰

From consideration of the figure of the shaman we now turn to consider the spirit world to which the shaman related. To attempt to sketch someone else’s world picture involves some risk. Yet research on the Inupiaq’s traditional beliefs holds special significance for the task of evangelism during the closing decade of the twentieth century.

Nature, of course, held a prime position in the world in a kind of “subsis-

⁷Åke Hultkrantz, “A Definition of Shamanism,” *Temenos* 9 (1973) 34 and “Ecological and Phenomenological Aspects of Shamanism,” in *Studies in Lapp Shamanism*, Louise Bäckman and Åke Hultkrantz, eds. (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1978) 11, as cited in Daniel Merkur, *Becoming Half Hidden: Shamanism and Initiation among the Inuit* (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell, 1985) 10-11.

⁸James W. Henkelman and Kurt H. Vitt, *Harmonious To Dwell: The History of the Alaska Moravian Church 1885-1985* (Bethel, AK: Moravian Seminary, 1985) 12-23; Kurt H Vitt, “Arctic Native Spirituality: What We Can Learn from This Tradition,” *The North American Moravian* (May, 1988) 14-15.

⁹Merkur, *Becoming Half Hidden*, 41-69.

¹⁰The title for this section is inspired by William A. Fitzhugh and Susan A. Kaplan’s *Inua: Spirit World of the Bering Sea Eskimo* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1982).

tence” which current advocates of native Alaskan sovereignty describe as an almost total harmony with land, sea, and air. The relationship between the Inupiaq and environment went far beyond and far deeper than Western concepts of ownership, for, while the hunter took caribou and seal for the earth, he also took his identity from the earth. According to Vitt, Arctic people

have demonstrated that harmony—peaceful coexistence of otherwise hostile elements—can exist where competition and the seeking of personal gain are restricted...harmony prevailed and contentment resulted.¹¹

Nature and the supernatural interacted. The Norwegian explorer Fritjof Nansen found in the 1890s that Arctic people believed every object, animate and inanimate, to have a soul. Journalist Sam Hall summarizes:

everything was alive: stones, sledges, harpoons, the creaking ice, the waves in the sea and the air they breathed. Even hunger, pain, sleep, love and laughter were thought to be possessed.¹²

Native Alaskans identified this over-arching “spirit of the world,” or “eye of the world” as *sila* or *silam inua*, the inhabitant or soul of the universe which a shaman could describe as having a gentle voice like a woman. In a voice so fine and gentle that even children could not fear it said: *sila ersinarsinivdluge*, “be not afraid of the universe.” Although Hall and others to call *sila* whose vital force “created and permeated all things and, like the Chinese *Tao*, was inexhaustible and intangible,” a supreme deity, careful investigators have found considerably more democracy in the Inupiaq supernatural. *Sedna*, or *Arnarkuagssaq*, the goddess of the sea; *Narssuk*, the giant child who lived in space and who helped to control weather; and the man in the moon.

Even though nature and supernature interacted, they were still separate. In the 1870s ethnologist Edward Nelson heard of a land of plenty in the sky populated by the “shades of shamans or persons who had died by accident, violence, or starvation.” Besides the land of plenty, there was an underground land of the dead populated by the “shades of animals and of people who had died from natural causes.”¹³ Native people of the southern Seward Peninsula knew where to find a door to that spirit world. Old people at Teller recall that on the cliff along the Tuksuk Channel there was a place with a big black rock up on the hillside where shamans went when they died.

The Inupiaq offered no systematic reflection on the notion of “supernatural” or “spirit,” but they did distinguish various elements in the spirit world. At the good end of a dualism was the *inua*, translated by Nelson as “shade” or by others as “indweller.” The *inue* inhabited human beings, animals, and physical phenomena like snow or wind, giving them their power and form. The bad half of the dualism, *tornat*, “spirits,” inhabited no physical phenomena; they were ghosts of humans or animals that could not journey to the afterlife and had become malicious. Perhaps their mourners had broken taboos or failed in the performance of their duties to the

¹¹Vitt, “Arctic Native Spirituality,” 14.

¹²Sam Hall, *The Fourth World: The Heritage of the Arctic and Its Destruction* (New York: Random House,

dead. Whatever the explanation, earthbound ghosts lingered about, exerting unfavorable influence.

It is here that the shamans exercise their role as socially sanctioned mediators between humans and the supernatural. While they reputedly worked reconciliation with the *inue*—healing the sick, attracting game animals, influencing the weather and seeing the future—their helping spirits came from the ranks of the *tornat*. Shamans had gained control over as many earthbound ghosts as possible and sent them as envoys to the winds or blizzards, to the bottom of the sea or the top of the mountains, or into the future.

To sum up: the Inupiaq's world of nature and of supernature were closely interrelated, even though the supernatural retained its own, separate identity. Events occurring in nature always had a supernatural cause; the *inue* were upset or *tornat* were working evil. Hall's pantheon notwithstanding, *inue* and *tornat* tended to live in a dualistic democracy. Some *tornat* might prove more skillful than other *tornat*, in the same way that some people might prove more skillful or shrewd than other people. Since natural phenomena—illness, presence or absence of game animals, weather—had supernatural causes, the Inupiaq found ways of influencing the supernatural. They worshipped no idols, but they used amulets and charms, and asked shamans for help.

IV. A MISSIONARY ASSAULT ON THE SPIRIT WORLD?

Before the arrival of the missionaries, the *nilamiut*, originally “evil men,” but today synonymous with “White people,” had already introduced a definitely non-native way of viewing land. These *nilamiut* traders set foot on a fragile tundra and stepped on a fragile people. Hunting, fishing, gathering, and a host of other native activities, once viewed as sacred, now became for many merely secular pursuits. When the missionaries came to the Seward Peninsula, they too contributed to the acculturation of native people and, consequently, to the secularization of their natural world. The Lutheran Brevig came not only or even primarily as a preacher, but served also as teacher and manager of a fledgling reindeer industry. The Presbyterian Sheldon Jackson saw preaching and teaching as fostering an acculturated native population. Richard Nelson accuses such missionaries, who doubled as teachers or government agents, of having an adverse effect by their ridicule of hunting and fishing and by their imposition of a Sunday moratorium on subsistence activities.¹⁴

Final judgment on the missionaries' impact on native Alaska's subsistence life style are pending, however. While some critics report a condescending attitude on the part of individual missionaries toward subsistence, others refer to missionaries who advocated native rights early on, and who, in the wake of epidemics, actually taught subsistence skills to orphans. For present purposes suffice it to say that it seems clear that missionary work had an impact on a nature-connected spirituality that struck at the heart of subsistence living. On the other hand, missionaries seem also to have assumed a relationship between nature and the supernatural that would have been quite familiar to the proselytized. Far from being emissaries of a refined, university-generated, post-Enlightenment theology and world view that had dis-

mantled the supernatural, they were more likely emissaries of other intellectual or even anti-intellectual options available in western Europe for which the supernatural was still very much intact. From the missionary accounts, it appears that although preachers provided the Inupiaq with no sustained treatise on the supernatural or on the concept of spirit, they did appear willing to maintain the Inupiaq supernatural while repopulating it with a Christian cast of characters.

Missionaries worked hard to replace spirits or to assert a kind of power of the Christian God over spirits like that which the “spirit of the world” or the “eye of the world” had previously held. At the turn of the last century, for instance, Edward Nelson noted that those who had been reached by Russian Orthodoxy spoke of God as *tun-run-ai-yuk*—“chief of the spirits.” Replacing spirits or asserting the power of the Christian God over spirits, however, would not constitute a final assault on the Inupiaq experience of the supernatural and contact with it, nor would it challenge the notion that the events of nature have an immediate cause in the supernatural. Missionary Brevig and his successors spoke of souls and of breaking the power of what they lumped together as evil spirits. They showed no concern for possible distinctions between souls and *inue* of human beings. Neither did they dismiss evil spirits or distinguish them from *tornat*.

Inupiaq sources, on the other hand, saw the conflict at this point to be not one between cultures but between spirits. Actually, many Seward Peninsula Christians saw the realm of the *tornat* as present but as powerless before the greater spirits brought by the missionaries. A few still discussed their freedom from evil spirits. Meanwhile, Edward Nelson’s “land of plenty in the sky” took on a Christian, and possibly individualistic, character as Beulah Land, the beautiful shore, the “up yonder.” Even religious feasts traditionally held at mid-winter or spring took on a Christian character as Christmas and “conferences.”¹⁵

In the interplay between nature and supernature, the Inupiaq continued to experience a desperate need for mediation: Who would intercede with the chief of spirits or knock out the *tornat*? Toward the end of the nineteenth century, preachers and teachers on the Seward Peninsula observed a growing interest in Christ. Native people began to find in Christ someone more effective than a shaman; they returned to shamans only when convenient to do so. According to Dorothy Jean Ray, the Inupiaq came to admire “Christ’s miraculous powers that seemed even greater than...shamans’ trips to the moon or recovery from mortal wounds”; Jesus became for Arctic people a sort of “supershaman.”¹⁶

Missionaries—along with teachers and medical professionals—took for themselves much of the social function once performed by the shamans. Some people would resist this assertion, arguing that Christian preachers do not traffic in the ecstatic experiences known to have been part and parcel of shamanism. When one notes, however, that current students of shamanism tend to downplay the ecstatic and emphasize the shamans’ social role of mediation and their reliance upon helping spirits, the shift from shaman to preacher becomes quite plausible. The missionaries knew of the supernatural, set about contacting it, and did so on behalf

¹⁵For a description of such a “conference,” see Larry Jorgensen, “Taking Root in the Tundra: An Alaskan Church,” *One World* (May 1989) 12-14.

of those in trouble. In this the “supershaman” helped them; the “chief of spirits” was their helping spirit.

Brevig could chase shamans only as far as the boundaries of his mission; he could not eliminate them from the Seward Peninsula by missionary fiat. Undoubtedly, he was helped by the quality of his story and by the actions of the shamans themselves, who eventually obtained their medicines from preachers, teachers, and government agents. Brevig and the others were also helped by the laity, who took the power shift as not altogether infelicitous. Power was removed from members of the community who had invariably stood on one side or the other of the numerous family conflicts and village squabbles; it was in turn invested in persons who would remain on the outside looking in.

V. POPULAR RELIGIOSITY TODAY

Robert J. Schreiter’s able sketch of the scope of popular religiosity offers a helpful perspective for summarizing the current Seward Peninsula situation.¹⁷ Accordingly, religiosity offers less an intellectual view of life than a way of life with its own dynamics: God reigns from heaven as the provident creator who rewards and punishes and whose intervention relates to all events large and small. The adherents to popular religiosity seek blessings; they implement religious objects that invoke divine power and ward off evil. Official prescriptions for religious activity go unheeded unless they coincide with a popular concern such as prayer for deliverance from personal or corporate trouble or church attendance for baptisms and funerals. Clergy have their uses when people need them for mediation. Like the shamans of times long ago they intervene with a spirit world to assure blessings and well-being. When not exercising that mediatory role, the clergy’s advice tends to fall on deaf ears.

Popular religiosity endures and will continue to endure despite attempts to ignore it or to whip it into respectable theological shape. Native American theology of this locale needs to take it seriously, but frequently overlooks it in hopes of finding the great dialogue between Black Elk and the modern consciousness. At other times local theology mistakes popular religiosity for a European import, frowns on it as an opium for the masses, or simply disregards it as inadequate.

Clergy new to this area, however, soon learn the deep roots of popular religiosity as well as the reality of local leadership. Those leaders, whom we have called Christian shamans, emerged early. In the Kuskowim region to the south of the Seward Peninsula, one convert was the son of a shaman and in training to become a shaman. Helper Neck, as he was known, devoted himself to the spreading of the gospel through both preaching and his own writing system. On the Seward Peninsula itself, Brevig tells of the conversion of Avitarluk, a “chieftain and medicine man,” who had a dream about Brevig’s dead son, Carl. Avitarluk “had seen Carl hovering over him on wings like those of angels which he had seen in pictures. In the dream he tried to grasp Carl but then he woke up.” Avitarluk, evidently, experienced great sorrow at the thought that he could not join Carl, so Brevig instructed him “as to how he and everyone could go there.”¹⁸ In the same

¹⁷Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1985) 122-143.

corner of the Seward Peninsula, a nineteenth-century sea captain rejoiced that Punginguhk had repented from evil spirits. Punginguhk replied:

“Yes, I gave myself to your God. I do no more witch doctoring. It is a good thing Native people do not have shamans with us any more. White people would have no chance to bother us because it would be easy for us to do our crimes with our false spirits.”

The strengths of popular religiosity should be admitted when and where they are found. Important in this connection is Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci’s suggestion that popular religiosity develops independently of “official religion” as a way of maintaining cultural identity. Eugene Genovese’s study of slave religion in the United States applies this approach in concluding that popular religiosity contributed to the survival of oppression.¹⁹

The Seward Peninsula does indeed have a popular religiosity that has developed independently of “official religion” and that places its own demands upon imported clergy. White pastors fulfill some shaman duties by telling the story and interceding. But it is just possible that Seward Peninsula popular religiosity has contributed to the survival of oppression by giving natives who remain faithful to shamanistic principles a sort of *kazgi*.

At the same time we have to ask with Schreiter whether popular religiosity in some way “hampers the general development of the community or hinders that development in more outright fashion.”²⁰ Does its supernatural orientation smack of pie-in-the-sky irrelevancy to a younger generation? Has it become part of the Inupiaq heritage that never quite got handed down or passed on due to the forces of rapid social change, family dysfunction, or the competing noises of a dominant and dominating culture? Is the intermediary role of white clergy appropriate in this age of emancipation and theologies of liberation? Even though an honest evaluation of the role of Seward Peninsula popular religiosity will leave many unanswered questions, any investigation of the Seward Peninsula situation that overlooks or minimizes the importance of popular religiosity shirks one of its crucial tasks.

A correct assessment sees that popular religiosity will not change because of the nagging of immigrant theologians. Popular religiosity will change when patterns of power and dominance change. In the interim, Schreiter says, we should value the small Christian communities and encourage their development.

When people discover that their baptism gives them a voice in responding to the challenges of the gospel, when leaders listen to what their communities say in such circumstances, then the dimensions of the religious symbolic universe begin to shift as people gain a sense of their own autonomy.²¹

Does popular religiosity stand in the way of future evangelism among young Inupiaq men and women? Maybe. But identifying the persistence of the phenomenon is one step toward an answer. Even if popular religiosity hinders evangelism, there are reasons to suspect we will have it among us for a good long while.

¹⁹See Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Basic Books, 1974); and for Gramsci, see Enzo Pace, "The Debate on Popular Religion in Italy," *Social Analysis* 40 (1979) 71-75. The citations are from Schreiter, *Local Theologies*, 136 nn. 31, 32.

²⁰Schreiter, *Local Theologies*, 142.

²¹Ibid., 143.

VI. POSTSCRIPT

A dark shadow fell over Toolik. A hard wind rushed over him. When he looked up he saw the *tingmiakpak*, the giant eagle. As soon as Toolik had killed the eagle with an arrow, a drum started beating. While he struggled back to his village, Kawerak, the drum got louder and louder. On the way, Toolik heard a voice, too. "Listen to the drumming sound. It is the heartbeat of the giant eagle's mother. She was so shocked and sad that her heart began to pound. There is only one way to make the mother's heart feel better. You must return the giant eagle's spirit to his mother." Ghostly visitors then told Toolik how to send the eagle's spirit home. They showed him how to dance the eagle's spirit home. They showed him how to make a drum that sounded just like the mother eagle's heartbeat. They showed him what to wear for the task at hand. They instructed him to send messengers to other villages to ask for help with the dancing. Toolik followed directions. He organized the first *nilga*, the first eagle-wolf messenger feast.

A dark shadow fell over Freddy. A hard wind rushed over him. When he looked up, he saw the army helicopter. Toolik had lived in Kawerak. Freddy, too, was of the Kawerak people, but his family now lived in the artificial and inept town of Teller. Toolik had spoken Inupiaq; Freddy knew only village English. Toolik had worn furs; Freddy wore a down-filled parka and mirrored sun glasses. Toolik had carried a bow and arrows; Freddy's rifle lay at home with a rusted barrel. Toolik had gone by foot to look for game; Freddy sped aimlessly across the ice on a snow machine bought with welfare money. Toolik had danced to return the eagle's spirit to the mother eagle. Freddy had heard old people talk of a giant bird, but he had never attended an eagle-wolf messenger feast. How could he? The last one had been held in 1914; it was now 1989.

In 1918 some eagle-wolf dancers posed for a photograph that Freddy had never seen. Soon after the picture was taken, a flu epidemic caught the eagle-wolf dancers by surprise. They still look at us from the photograph—serious, proud, and totally defenseless against what was soon to happen. The eagle-wolf dancers took Toolik's story with them to death. And a lot more besides.

An Inupiaq family danced to celebrate old Toolik's departure to the spirit world. "We will go to the *kazgi* tonight and give our help to the others who are celebrating Toolik's admission to the spirit world. Sometimes the spirit of a person will not leave and it becomes one of the *tornat*. That is to be pitied."

They also sang to celebrate Freddy's departure for the other shore. "When the trumpet of the Lord shall sound and time shall be no more...when the saved of earth shall gather over on the other shore, and the roll is called up yonder, I'll be there." The singing continued: "In the sweet by and by, we shall meet on that beautiful shore." Freddy had gone to a better place, where God was waiting for him.

Changes in "official religion" had not meant wholesale changes in popular religiosity. Meanwhile, the popular religiosity still in place in 1989 seemed hard put to deal not with a natural death—as was Toolik's—but with an alcohol-related suicide—as was Freddy's. Was the supernatural focus obscuring the realities of the here and now?