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Respect: A Bridge Between Inupiaq Tradition and Christianity

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SENIOR THESIS APPROVAL

This Honors thesis entitled

**“Respect: A Bridge Between Inupiaq tradition and
Christianity”**

written by

Ashley Sharpe

and submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for completion of
the Carl Goodson Honors Program
meets the criteria for acceptance
and has been approved by the undersigned readers.

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Respect: A Bridge Between Inupiaq Tradition and Christianity

By Ashley Sharpe, under the direction
of Dr. Barbara Pemberton

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INTRODUCTION

For the indigenous peoples of Alaska, there is an ever-present tension between maintaining cultural identity and participating in the modern world. Like the indigenous peoples of most of the rest of the world, they have experienced colonization, subjugation, and appropriation by other cultures, starting with the arrival of Russians and improving but continuing with the transition from Russian control to American statehood. While the relationship between the United States and the indigenous peoples of Alaska has improved, the influence of other cultures on the First Nations peoples is undeniable, and they have been left to figure out how to identify and maintain the traditional aspects that remain.

The religious aspects of the tensions between traditional culture and adaptation are unique. Many of the indigenous peoples in Alaska have converted to various denominations of Christianity over the course of the last 300 years or so.¹ As is typical, Christian missionary activity accompanied colonization. The result is a large number of indigenous Alaskans who practice Christianity, and interestingly, the way in which they practice Christianity has helped them to maintain certain cultural values that may have otherwise been deemphasized. There are, of course, also broad differences in religious belief and practice between traditional indigenous religion and Christianity, but the areas of overlap are remarkable and helped pave the way for the growth of Christianity among the northern First Nations peoples.

This thesis seeks to explore the way in which indigenous expressions of Christianity in Alaska help to promote and maintain certain native cultural values. The core value that will be explored is respect as expressed through beliefs and practices associated with community and the environment. While the main focus will be on the Inupiat people in particular, some research will

¹ Ernest S. Burch, "The Inupiat and the Christianization of Arctic Alaska," *Études/Inuit/Studies* 18, no. 1/2 (1994), 81.

reflect the general expression of Christianity throughout Alaska. This will be shown by exploring the transition of how respect is conceptualized and practiced from traditional Inupiaq religion to current indigenous Christianity, first through different aspects of belief regarding community, then through different aspects of belief regarding the environment. Generally speaking, the traditional conceptions are based on what was recorded by missionaries and settlers who first made contact as well as indigenous individuals who have maintained knowledge concerning native beliefs.

My original goal for this thesis was to explore the concept of soul dualism held by some of the northern First Nations peoples of North America. I received the Ben Elrod Travel Grant from Ouachita Baptist University and was able to spend about ten days in Anchorage, Alaska and about ten more days in Vancouver, British Columbia. The initial goal was to establish some contacts in the area who were knowledgeable in indigenous studies, but most of my time was spent visiting museums and cultural centers instead. The result was that my thesis completely changed direction.

While in Alaska, I had the privilege of being exposed to Inupiaq people who were passionately educating other Inupiaq people and anyone else who would listen about traditional culture and how to keep it alive. There were presentations, exhibits, and demonstrations that touched on hunting, cooking, language, sewing, sports, and about any other aspect of indigenous life that you could think of except for one: religion. At first I was baffled by the lack of traditional storytelling involving souls, spirits, shamans, or great tales of mystical events such as creation. There would be remnants in the form of souvenirs with Raven emblems or animals that represented character traits, but the actual stories that represented belief were nowhere to be found.

I finally discovered the reason behind the lack of what I thought of as traditional stories when I visited the Heritage Cultural Center. They do presentations on different aspects of Inupiaq life there, and one man did traditional storytelling. His stories were mostly about life events that reflected the culture well, and he eventually made a comment about meeting someone who was of Christian faith. His response, paraphrased, was “Oh, sure. We’re all Christians now. Some are Lutheran, some are Catholic, some are Baptist.” That was when it finally made sense to me. The reason that the religious aspect of Inupiaq life had all but disappeared from public preservation was because, on the whole, the Inupiaq community is now Christian!

This put me in an interesting sort of dilemma. On the one hand, I myself am a Christian, so this was certainly exciting news for me. I had known that there had been a history of heavy missionary activity in the area, but to find that people had been receptive to the point of openly claiming the title of “Christian” and advocating biblical ideals was beyond what I had hoped. On the other hand, it meant that my original idea for a thesis was totally irrelevant. They had abandoned the traditional Inupiaq conception of soul dualism with the old religious practices, and when asked about it, even the average person working at the Heritage Cultural Center who was well versed in culture and tradition did not have knowledge of the oral traditions that shared that knowledge. For instance, when giving a tour of a model of a traditional home, a staff member gave detailed explanations of every aspect of the entire building. When asked for the story behind the significance of Raven and Eagle carvings, though, he could only say that they were clan symbols and not elaborate on the oral traditions behind the animals. It was simply no longer a cultural priority.

This effectively left me without a topic. Sure, I could have hunted down some scholar who had an anthology of old oral traditions and beliefs, but my hope had been to explore a topic

that was relevant to modern Inupiaq life. Another option presented itself, though. While the more religious aspects of traditional Inupiaq life had faded, an effort to preserve cultural values and practices was the focal point of every site that honored the Inupiaq, as exemplified through the exhibits and presentations on the diverse aspects of traditional indigenous life. This truth combined with the more historically recent advent of Inupiaq Christian identity created an interesting partnership, and it is one that I have loved getting to explore.

I am passionate about the development of this topic for two reasons. The first is that it partners perfectly with the concept of God's general revelation serving to reveal his truths to all peoples and prepare their hearts to receive his truth even before they have heard of him.² Even in the midst of flawed methodology from some missionaries, the gospel resonated enough with God's previously revealed truths that it still took hold. The second is that I believe that varying cultural perspectives are needed for full understanding of the gospel. No one culture has the key to understanding the whole gospel, and the Western church is woefully prone to forgetting that. It is my hope that through the process of my writing and others' reading this thesis that we may learn from our Inupiaq brothers and sisters in Christ how we may more holistically and beautifully understand the gospel and the God whom we serve.

Who are the indigenous people of Alaska and the Inupiat?

It is a bit artificial to separate out the First Nations peoples of Alaska from the rest of the northern First Nations people, because the indigenous people stretching from eastern Russia to Greenland all share a similar ethnic background despite their different experiences with the governments that they now live under, and they recognize that shared culture. There are even shared languages that cross the Alaska-Russia divide, which results from cross-Pacific hunting

² Psalm 19:1-4, Romans 1:19-20.

migration and eventual separation as a result of the eventual purchase of Alaska by the United States. That being said, the peoples native to what is now Alaska will be the ones focused on in this study, with a particular emphasis on the Inupiat.³

This thesis will use the terms “northern First Nations peoples” and “indigenous peoples of Alaska” to refer to the indigenous groups in the north holistically and the First Nations peoples in Alaska, respectively. There are other terms that are, quite frankly, more commonly known and shorter. They each present issues, however. ‘Eskimo’ is considered a slur in Canada and, while sometimes used in Alaska, is also considered a mostly dated and somewhat offensive term. This is partially because there is speculation that it means “eater of raw meat,” which is untrue, but enough non-native people have thought that this is the meaning that it now carries that connotation. In addition, it is a name that was given by non-native peoples, thus depriving them of the chance to portray themselves in a way that they considered appropriate.⁴

‘Inuit’ is not necessarily offensive, and it is widely used in Canada. It is also used often in Alaska, such as in the *I AM INUIT* exhibit previously shown in the Anchorage Museum, but the term still is not without its own issues. ‘Inuit’ originally designated the Inupiat specifically, but it then spread to be used to describe all northern indigenous groups, which is an irritating form of generalization for the diverse First Nations peoples. It also is not the word that the particular group, the Inupiat, prefer to use to describe themselves. It is best to use specific tribal designations when possible, and when necessary, I will use terms mentioned previously to describe commonalities between groups. These terms are still general, but they avoid misnomers

³ The Alaska Native Heritage Center Museum, “Frequently Asked Questions,” *AlaskaNative.net*, 2011. <http://www.alaskanative.net/en/para-nav/faq/>. Accessed April 22, 2018.

Information on the relationship between northern First Nations peoples taken from presentations at the Alaska Native Heritage Center in Anchorage, Alaska. Visit www.alaskanative.net for more information.

⁴ Ibid.

through generalization and acknowledge that there are numerous groups being described rather than one large homogenous group. Varied terminology from different sources should be expected, though.⁵

The group that this paper focuses on primarily is the Inupiat.⁶ The Inupiaq people are the indigenous tribe native to northern Alaska. They share the Inupiaq language and can be broken into inland and coastal groups. Both groups rely heavily on caribou and fish for sustenance, but the coastal Inupiaq also rely on whaling. Life in the northernmost part of Alaska means exposure to its harshest elements, so travel is difficult at best and limited for much of the year. Seasonal travel and hunting restrictions lead to months of time indoors with extended family, causing there to be a large societal emphasis on the importance of the family.⁷

A word about Christian missionary activity

Before delving into the details of the changeover in belief due to missionary activity, it is important to distinguish between the theology of the Western church and that of the indigenous Christian converts for two reasons. The first is that the church and the missionaries that represented it sometimes tended to attempt to squash indigenous religious forms that were perceived as being counter to true Christian worship, even when the indigenous worship practices were in no way anti-Christian. This was especially prevalent in the early missionary days. The second reason, which is closely related, is that Western Christians had a tendency to worship in a way that was very dependent on their own culture, and Inupiaq reluctance to adopt those particular religious practices out of a fear of losing their own culture was often interpreted

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Singular: Inupiaq. Sometimes also spelled with a 'i', depending on the dialectical region.

⁷ Alaska Humanities Forum, "Chapter 2-4: Eskimos," *Alaska's Heritage*, 2018. <http://www.akhistorycourse.org/alaskas-cultures/alaskas-heritage/chapter-2-4-eskimos>. Accessed April 22, 2018.

by the Westerners as opposition to certain aspects of Christianity.⁸ Erasing either one of those historical truths is to erase painful aspects of the history of evangelization to indigenous North American peoples, and although that is not the focus of this thesis, I would be remiss not to frame this paper of it in the context of cultural friction and even abuse due to lack of understanding on the part of the Western missionaries.

Conversion of the Inupiaq was most successful when missionaries substituted old beliefs or refined them rather than simply telling them to stop believing in something. Removing an entire section of worldview is difficult, especially when that section of worldview serves to explain the nature of the world or interactions that must definitely occur, but which have no motivation without explanation. By replacing and refining belief, then, missionaries helped indigenous peoples to retain a holistic understanding of the world and interact with their new faith in a positive way.⁹ Despite the unfortunate truth that the replacing and refining technique was often lacking, this paper will focus more on it due to the nature of its content.

Contrary to the beliefs of some of the early missionaries, the belief that there is value in maintaining cultural identity is actually very biblical. There are passages in Revelation that describe distinct ethnic groups worshipping God for eternity. Furthermore, while Paul does specify that identity in Christ supersedes cultural identity, he certainly does not argue against celebrating that diversity within the church. It is something to rejoice in that God calls varied and distinct peoples to himself, and with a proper biblical understanding, that may be appreciated.¹⁰

⁸ Cornelius H.W. Remie and Jarich Oosten, "The Birth of a Catholic Inuit Community: The Transition to Christianity in Pelly Bay, Nunavut, 1935-1950," *Études/Inuit/Studies* 26, no. 1 (2002), 114-116.

⁹ Ibid., 134.

¹⁰ Revelation 7:9-10, Galatians 3:7-9.

The partnership between general revelation as expressed in cultural norms and revealed, scriptural truth is what this thesis seeks to explore.

Why use oral tradition as a source?

Indigenous Alaskan religion centered around oral traditions that tell of spirits, people, and the ways of life. These stories are called *Unipkaat*,¹¹ and although some are unique to specific tribal groups, many crossed tribal borders in some form or fashion and exemplified overarching principles for all Alaskan indigenous peoples. The stories can of course be written out, but they exist in their truest form when shared orally between the people who know them by heart. There is power behind words and especially names for the Inupiaq people, and properly shared stories will have respect woven into the very fabric of their telling, because to name the characters is to call them up and interact with them.¹² There are also origin myths that accompany any ritual or ceremonial action and explain its importance, which places certain oral traditions at the center of the most important aspects of Inupiaq life.¹³ Although much of the information presented in this paper is not in story format, it does stem from information that has been passed on primarily through oral means between generations of Inupiaq people rather than a systematized and routinely documented set of doctrines. For these reasons, all of the Inupiaq religious thought is best categorized as oral tradition.

¹¹ Barbara Bodenhorn, "It's Traditional to Change: A Case Study of Strategic Decision-Making," *Cambridge Anthropology* 22, no. 1 (2000), 24.

¹² Daniel Merkur, *Powers Which We Do Not Know: The Gods and Spirits of the Inuit*, University of Idaho Press, Moscow, Idaho: 1991, 13-14.

¹³ Daniel Merkur, "Eagle, the Hunter's Helper: The Cultic Significance of Inuit Mythological Tales," *History of Religions* 27, no. 2 (1987), 181.

COMMUNITY

Human Nature

Traditional Conception

To understand the way that members of the traditional community related to one another, it is important to understand first how they conceived of individuals within the community prior to the shift to Christianity. The Inupiaq oral traditions state that each individual has both a free-soul and a breath-soul. The breath-soul is attached to each person and provides life. Life begins with the attachment of the breath-soul and ends when it is ripped from that person. Breath-souls are anthropomorphic for both humans and animals and tend to shift into the form that best represents their personality. It also encompasses the mind and endures after death in the form of the name-soul.¹⁴ While a long-standing belief was that the name-soul would eventually enter a baby that was named after a deceased person of import to the family and thus become that baby's breath-soul, there was a shift in belief to the name-souls returning to earth posthumously in their original form. This shift occurred relatively shortly before Christian missionaries began coming to Alaska.¹⁵

The free-soul has the ability to leave the body during dreams or, in the case of shamans, during intentional spirit flights in order to interact directly with other souls and spirits. At death, the free-soul becomes the ghost of the individual, set either to enter an afterlife realm or continue to interact on earth as either a reincarnated being or as a malignant spirit. Therefore, each soul has an aspect of permanency and the potential for return to earth traditionally attributed to it.¹⁶

¹⁴ Merkur, *Powers*, 19-20.

¹⁵ Burch, 93.

¹⁶ Merkur, *Powers*, 20.

Post-Conversion Conception

The Inupiaq people easily adopted the Christian belief in eternal life with God due to their preexisting conception of the permanency of the soul. Early Catholic missionaries allowed a dangerous amount of syncretism concerning other beliefs about the soul, but the prevailing nature did fit well with Christian belief. Therefore, the shift to belief in eternal heavenly life with the Creator God was not a large jump, especially with the development of name-soul belief prior to missionary arrival from attachment to babies to eternal earthly life.¹⁷

Sources of Authority

Traditional Conception

Community leadership stemmed from two sources: shamans and, to perhaps a lesser degree, elders. Shamans were qualified based solely on their ability to intentionally interact with spirits. They had varying degrees of power and ability that stemmed from how many spirits with whom they were able to communicate. Their place of authority among the people was by virtue of their being able to identify grievances that spirits had with the people and to solve the issues by either making peace between the people and the spirit or by confronting the spirit. Despite only having one set requirement, the shamanic position bestowed a tremendous amount of authority within the community. Unfortunately, they were aware of this power, and many shamans used it to manipulate the communities that they lived in through fear tactics in order to serve their own interests.¹⁸ The elders had lived long enough to gain wisdom, so they also had a strong voice in the community and a responsibility to pass on wisdom to the younger generations, but they were revered rather than feared in the way that many feared the shamans.

¹⁷ Remie and Oosten, 128-130.

¹⁸ Burch, 97.

High emphasis on the importance of all members of the community also means that the actions of all members in a community affect its well-being. If everyone is important and worth valuing, they are also all capable of disturbing the flow of life or even causing damage to the community as a whole. This is especially true of ritual actions that were meant to draw both the people together and to fulfill a need such as helping a hunt be successful or beseeching an upset spirit to cooperate. Consequently, it was common practice for those who disrupted a communal ritual event by acting out to be disciplined by the group in a public setting. Shamans were in charge of meting out disciplinary actions, which were generally in the form of a public confession or ritual shamanic discipline.¹⁹

Post-Conversion Conception

Due to a biblical denouncement of following those controlled by spirits²⁰ and an emphasis on church leadership, ministers have replaced shamans in many ways. Shamans do still exist, especially in more rural areas, but the general fear of shamans and dislike of their abuse of power that was brewing within Inupiaq communities provided a motivation to listen when the missionaries began arriving. This helped ease the transition from shamans to ministers, because the people did not desire a loss of spiritual leadership and yet did desire spiritual leadership that was not aligned with spirits of questionable character.²¹

There is a distinction drawn between experiencing God in community and being able to reach God through the community, though. The Inupiaq look to the church and its ministers for guidance and teaching about specific Christian beliefs, and they draw near to God in communal

¹⁹ A. Nicole Stuckenberger, "Sociality, Temporality and Locality in a Contemporary Inuit Community," *Études/Inuit/Studies* 30, no. 2 (2006), 98-99.

²⁰ Leviticus 19:31.

²¹ Burch, 93.

settings. The drawing near to God is done without mediation by another human, though.

Ministers who attempt to mediate actually hinder the process of the people feeling like they are able to draw near to God. The community helps with understanding, but the experience of God himself is better without a mediator.²²

Administering Care

Traditional Conception

Both at feasts and in everyday life, there was to be priority on giving food to the widows and elders of the community. This is partially due to their respected status as wise elderly individuals, but mostly due to their physical inability to provide for themselves. This is another reflection of the fact that, despite the harsh realities of surviving in Alaska, Inupiaq society was not structured in a way that prioritized the physically strong above all else. Physical strength was celebrated, but it was celebrated because of the way that it could benefit the whole community, and care was taken to ensure that all members of the community were able to comfortably survive.²³

Post-Conversion Conception

Cultural emphasis on caring for the elders of the community is also well matched with Christian scripture. The book of Acts describes the beginnings of the deacons, whose primary jobs are described as caring for widows and orphans. The diaconate was designed to fill a void and ensure that these people were valued and cared for in a respectful manner. In 1 Timothy, Paul exhorts Timothy to set up a system of deacons for specifically handling the care of the widows in the church. Only the most upstanding individuals were to be assigned their care,

²² Stuckenberger, 103-104.

²³ Bodenhorn, 29.

revealing that it was considered an important task. Paul also provides a framework for seeking advice and leadership from the elders in the church, understanding that they have wisdom to pass on to the younger members.²⁴ All of this reveals a scriptural value on the elders of the community that coincides well with the respect that the Inupiaq people feel is appropriate to show the elders in their community.

Unfortunately, yet unsurprisingly, not all results of Western innovation have had a positive impact on the community. Suicide rates in Alaska are the second highest in the United States on average.²⁵ Homelessness, drug addiction, and alcoholism are all plagues upon the Inupiaq. It is true that the general population of Alaska as a whole struggles inordinately with these issues in comparison with the rest of the United States, possibly due to some environmental factors such as lack of sunlight during part of the year, but the indigenous population is far more likely to suffer from substance abuse, homelessness, and suicidal tendencies.²⁶ These problems have arisen in recent history, and there is an undeniable correlation between the contact with and adoption of more Western-style societal structures and the increased rates of these issues. The complex contributions to these societal issues are unfortunately beyond the scope of this paper, but it will suffice to say that those who are not suffering under the influence of drugs, alcohol, depression, or homelessness, caring for those who are hurting has become a necessary priority.

Counseling through the church has also taken on an important role in shaping the lives of youth. Elders still depend heavily on interaction with the environment to help form good

²⁴ 1 Timothy 3:1-13. See also Acts 6:1-15 on the formation of the diaconate.

²⁵ Juneau Empire, "Alaska suicide rate is highest in at least 20 years," *JuneauEmpire.com*, January 26, 2017. <http://juneauempire.com/news/statc/2017-01-26/alaska-suicide-rate-highest-least-20-years>. Accessed April 12, 2018.

²⁶ Minority Rights Group International, "The United States of America: Inuit and Alaska Natives," *MinorityRights.org*, 2018. <http://minorityrights.org/minorities/inuit-and-alaska-natives/>. Accessed April 22, 2018. This resource provides excellent access to information about the legal issues faced by the indigenous Alaskans.

character in young people, especially troubled ones. Church counseling has become an equally viable and important solution to them, though.²⁷ This means that the Christian church is now seen as a representative of the community and its ideals and is held as such by the elders who are the keepers of tradition. The church is not usurping the role of traditional community in their view, but coming alongside it as a legitimate outpouring of the community itself with the ability to make someone a true Inupiaq.

Celebration and Communal Activity

Traditional Conception

Due to the harsh climate in Arctic regions, the Inupiaq people have historically been forced to spend months in close living quarters with relatives in order to stay sheltered from the ferocious winters. Rather than being a time of dismay, the winter months were a time to relax, focus on family, and enjoy time together. Indigenous sports played in tents both honed valuable hunting skills and drew everyone closer together. Personal stories and oral traditions were shared and taught, passed from old to young. There was a high emphasis on enjoying the company of family.²⁸

The very act of eating was also, in many ways, sacred. Similar to many other cultures, the Inupiaq people both take pride in their food and take pride in being able to share that food with others. According to the elders, the food itself does not taste as good when it is not properly shared with others. Also, the very process of getting the food and preparing it was sacred due to the emphasis on treating the land and animals with their due respect, which will be further elaborated on in the environment section. As a result, then, eating the food provided by the

²⁷ Stuckenberg, 102.

²⁸ Adams, Brian, *I AM INUIT*, Inuit Circumpolar Council (2017). <http://iaminuit.org/>. Accessed April 12, 2018. For examples, see the *I AM INUIT* webpage.

sacrifice of the animals, environment, and hunters was a significant act that drew people together in the way that shared sacred experiences will. Large, formal feasts called potlaches carried an even greater significance. The whole structure of the potlach was designed to serve two purposes. First, they generally honored a specific member or family in the community who, by hosting and providing, gained status in the eyes of the community. Second, potlaches were promoted communally for a time before they occurred and incited much celebration when, at long last, they arrived. The resulting feasts greatly bolstered the community as a whole.²⁹

Post-Conversion Conception

Christianity spread through indigenous Alaska and Canada through community. Missionaries brought theology initially, but as they branched out to new areas, they found that Christianity had already reached new areas that Westerners had never encountered. Furthermore, individual conversions were exceptionally rare. When someone made the decision to convert, it was because their whole family was converting. The decision by northern First Nations peoples to adopt Christian beliefs stems strongly from their identity as a people whose beliefs relate to their communal identity. It was a decision of the people, and that is the reason that it has thrived among northern indigenous populations.³⁰

There was Western influence in more secular ways too, though, as all of Alaska increasingly adopted Western cultural forms to some extent. This allowed there to be a somewhat smoother interaction between Inupiaq Christians and Western worship forms. An example of Christianity working in conjunction with Western tendencies is found in communal celebrations of Christian holidays. The celebration of the holiday itself stems from Christian

²⁹ Bodenhorn, 26.

³⁰ Remie and Oosten, 113.

belief, but the ability to celebrate as a community in the way that the Inupiaq people have come to enjoy is also possible because of life in stationary, modern towns rather than in nomadic or semi-nomadic tribes. For instance, yearly Christmas festivities may be planned and held in a way that they could not be if the people were migrating based on weather patterns and availability of food sources. The result is yearly celebrations that both celebrate new religious beliefs and draw the community closer together.³¹

Specific features of the Christmas celebration also reflect the way in which traditional community emphasis pairs perfectly with Christian belief. Traditional foods are shared with community, both bringing memories of meals from the past and enjoyment of long-appreciated delicacies with present loved ones. Furthermore, the games of the past that had brought family together during the winter months now feature prominently in Christmas celebrations. They draw the community together as before and celebrate both the physical prowess of individuals and the successful growth of those individuals as a result of their people helping them grow. It goes a step further, though. The games also serve as a symbol of conflict resolution with other people and with God himself. The joy in the relationships that are fostered and restored is applied also to relationships with God, thus deepening love and closeness between him and the people of the community.

Year-round events held at churches also contribute to the sense of community in modern Inupiaq towns. Coming together at the church is a way to connect and relate in more than ideology. With the decline of prominent cultural events that allow people to gather together, they need a place to connect to others. The church provides that outlet and does it with Christianity as

³¹ Stuckenberger, 101.

its backbone, thus creating a connection between good communal relations and Christian belief.³²

Unsurprisingly, the potlach remains a staple of indigenous life that blended seamlessly with Christianity. (Is it any wonder that an event that even sounds like “potluck” goes well with Christian life?) These large communal feasts are still celebrated with voracity. They now incorporate Christian prayers and worship forms rather than purely indigenous ones, but the function is still the same: to honor an important being, now acknowledged to be the Christian God, and to honor the members of the community. It now also has the added benefit of helping with cultural preservation through the holding of a traditional event that features Inupiaq dietary staples.

ENVIRONMENT

Animals

Traditional Conception

A common feature of Inupiaq stories is that animals have a similar sort of personhood as human beings. Before diving too far into this section, it is important to note that partitioning animals off from the section on community may not be how an indigenous individual would organize this paper, because the traditional Inupiaq conception is that animals and humans all interact with the earth in a similar sort of way and can have social interactions that Western conceptions generally limit to human relationships. The choice to include animals in the environment section, therefore, is in order to make sense within Western categories, and it should be understood as such.

³² Peter Collings, "Aging and Life Course Development in an Inuit Community," *Arctic Anthropology* 37, no. 2 (2000), 113.

The Inupiaq people generally held that animals have both a free soul and a breath soul in the same way that humans do, with each serving a different function within the being. Breath souls may even take on the form of other creatures based on the association between certain personality traits and particular animals just as they can for humans.³³ The mirrored nature of animal and human souls combined with the morphing of breath souls into animals yields a resultingly high view of animals that strongly affects the traditional Inupiaq value system and means that they regard animals as they do humans, as agents worthy of respect. It also causes their care for the environment to stem from a place of concern for the animals that inhabit it and need it to survive.

The story of Sedna showcases both the belief of the eternal nature of the soul and the intimate connection between humans and animals. Sedna is the daughter of the Great Spirit, named Torngarsoak, who created both dogs and humans to fill the land. Sedna desired to marry a dog after its creation, which brought shame to her father, so he cast her into the sea. When she clung desperately to the side of their boat in order to avoid her punishment, he cut off her fingers, which turned into the seal, the walrus, and the white bear. She fell to the bottom of the sea where her free-soul still resides, living sometimes as a human, sometimes as an animal, and sometimes as a hybrid between the two. This oral tradition serves as a lesson and reminder that the Inupiaq people are distinct from animals but that they also cannot discard their enduring closeness with them, underscored by Sedna's enduring presence at the bottom of the sea.³⁴

After a hunt, it is traditional for Inupiaq peoples to give hunted animals certain death rites that are analogous to the death rites of the Inupiaq people themselves. Neglecting these rites

³³ Merkur, *Powers*, 19-20. This is what is identified in majority Western culture as a "soul animal."

³⁴ Beatrix Arendt, "Caribou to Cod: Moravian Missionary Influence on Inuit Subsistence Strategies," *Historical Archaeology* 44, no. 3 (2010), 84.

causes the animal's soul to be distressed and can lead to friction between the soul and the humans that deprived it of a just death. Furthermore, traditional belief is that properly treated animals could be used to make amulets that would then allow able shamans to get help from that particular animal's spirit. In this way, honoring the animal is both good practice of cultural values and a useful tool to avoid being haunted and to gain power.³⁵

Animals were also honored through potlaches in a way similar to prominent members of the community. While a potlach could traditionally serve to bring a particular individual or family greater status, it could also be done in a way that served a certain animal and brought that animal honor. Eagles in particular were featured in Messenger Feasts. The host of the feast would speak on behalf of the eagle spirit, and he would wear an eagle mask. There would be eagle feather decorations featured with high ceremonial significance and poles present for the eagle spirit to roost on in order to be fully present in the happenings of the feast. In this way, the mutualistic relationship between the spirit and the people was maintained.³⁶

Post-Conversion Conception

While there are some Inupiaq that hold Christian beliefs and also believe in the traditional view of animals having souls, some have shifted to the view more commonly held that animals do not have souls in the same way that humans do. They still retain a high view of animal life, though, supported by principles drawn from the Creation account that are similar to the ones that support a high view of the environment. The result is that, while they do now credit God with provision of animals to hunt and acknowledge that conservation and respect of animal life is

³⁵ Merkur, "Eagle," 173-175.

³⁶ Ibid., 175-178.

centered in the necessity of honoring him, the forms used to achieve those ends and interact with animals are very similar to the pre-Christian methods.

Prayer is an integral part of modern whaling practices for the Inupiaq. Christian Inupiaq firmly believe that the whale still retains dignity as a part of God's creation, and they also recognize the importance of honoring God with all of their actions, so they pray over each aspect of the hunt. For Christian Inupiaq people, the blessing of God over the way that they hunt is now as prominent as and sometimes even more prominent than honoring the animal that is hunted.³⁷ This is a major shift from the more traditional practice of relying on the animals themselves and the *inua* to create favorable hunting circumstances, resulting in respect for God being seen as the main motivation for hunting rites.

The Inanimate Environment

Traditional Conception

The conception of environmental features such as plants, water, and wind differ from the conception of animals. These features cannot have souls, but they may be indwelt by *inua* or *inyua* that have specific personalities that correspond with the features being indwelt. The words "indweller" or "spirit" may also be used. These spirits may be better thought of as personalized ideas. They are not the environmental features themselves, but rather the idea behind the personality of that feature that indwells it and gives it character.³⁸

Since the environmental features are indwelt by *inua* spirits with their own agency and personalities, it is beyond human ability to be able to control them with ritual action. Humans can affect the spirits somewhat through a sort of social interaction with them, though, and this is

³⁷ Bodenhorn, 31-32.

³⁸ Merkur, *Powers*, 27.

where ritual actions come in. These actions are agents of communication and interaction rather than control, meant to help coax the *inuua* into behaving favorably despite the harsh conditions of the Alaskan terrain.³⁹

An excellent example is the Wind Indweller, commonly known as Sila. Sila is both powerful and dangerous. As the Wind Indweller, he remains unseen yet influential. The wind concept is extended to all sorts of weather, so everything from calm, mild days to furious snowstorms are attributed to Sila. Furthermore, the concepts of wind and breath are closely related, so Sila is able to influence the breath-souls of humans and animals and even provide them, thus providing the gift of life itself. This means that a measure of creative power is attributed to the Wind Indweller and associated with the wind.⁴⁰

Because of the close association between the breath-soul and Sila the Wind Indweller, the idea arose that singing is an act both possible because of Sila and that honors him. Singing is possible because of breath and generates a small wind, so it stems from the breath-soul and creates a force comparable to the one indwelt by Sila. The act of singing is enjoyable for both individuals and community, so it is a gift for which the Inupiaq are grateful. It is also a way for them to honor the indweller who greatly affects all areas of their lives, so it is a wonderful example of a practice that helps maintain this mutualistic, respectful relationship.⁴¹

Post-Conversion Conception

There is an important distinction between traditional Inupiaq conceptions of natural powers, such as indwellers, and the Western conception of gods. As previously stated, the

³⁹ Ibid., 33-34.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 44-47.

⁴¹ Ibid., 53-55.

Inupiaq did believe that they could have social and ritual interaction with the indwellers and that natural phenomena were sometimes a result of how that interaction occurred. They did not think that they were gods, though. They conceptualized them as natural powers in the world that were deserving of respect, but the respect was not worship. It was more similar to the respect others may pay to a very powerful ruler or diplomat with powers unavailable to most humans. To say that they worshipped the *inua* as gods, then, is to read Western conceptions of religion back on to their metaphysical beliefs.⁴²

That being said, there are some parallels in the conception of the *inua* and Christianity. For instance, Sila has creative powers by virtue of being able to provide breath-souls to humans and animals. There have even been positively received translations of the Genesis account of creation that use the name Sila when explaining God forming the world and breathing life into Adam. Rather than this being an instance of the Christian God being equated with an *inua*, it is an attempt to explain that certain powers that were traditionally attributed to Sila are actually more appropriately attributed to God.⁴³

Furthermore, despite the disparity in belief caused by the lack of Christian belief in spirits that embody environmental features, there is still a value placed on the earth that can easily be found in the Bible. This is another area where the Creation account comes into play. The purposeful design of all of creation by God is interpreted by many First Nations people that there is an inherent value in the environment. Furthermore, God's charge to Adam to care for the earth

⁴² Ibid., 29.

⁴³ Ibid., 45.

and cultivate it is interpreted by the Inupiat as a divine mandate to care for the environment, which resonates strongly with their environmental ethic.⁴⁴

The Inupiaq are deeply affronted by the current decimation of their native lands. It is no wonder that they see the sure and steady process of global warming as an invasive evil, especially since the Inupiat live in the Arctic region of Alaska. The post-contact, modern advent of global warming is causing indigenous lands that people live on and depend on to quite literally crumble away into the sea.⁴⁵ It is destroying their homes and way of life through the removal of these long-inhabited areas, and it violates their sense that the earth has a dignity worth respecting. Even for those who are not keeping measurements from year to year, decreases in access to fish and other sea game and the erosion of natural features such as glaciers is easily noticeable.⁴⁶ Changes that at one point took decades now take a few years. The earth that the Inupiaq people have held in high regard is dying before their eyes, and a fight for conservation is the result.

Furthermore, modern environmental practices have a degenerative effect on commonly held cultural values and practices. For many Inupiaq people, the ability to live off of the land's resources and pass on those skills to younger generations is an important aspect of indigenous life. One of the most prominent forms of cultural preservation in Alaska is passing on traditional methods of hunting, fishing, and craftsmanship to the youth, who in turn feel more connected to

⁴⁴ Genesis 1:31-2:1, Job 12:7-10. It could be debated whether this is an intrinsic or extrinsic value, but since the Inupiat regard the environment and its features with both intrinsic and extrinsic value, this does not seem to me to be an issue.

⁴⁵ Alaska Conservation Foundation, "Arctic," *AlaskaConservation.org*, 2018. <https://alaskaconservation.org/conservation-issues/arctic/>. Accessed April 12, 2018.

⁴⁶ Adams. Concerns over warmer winters and decreases various types of game from rural Inupiat can be found in the records of the *I AM INUIT* exhibit, previously on display at the Anchorage museum. Visit the website for more information.

their culture and ancestors. This is becoming increasingly difficult, though, with the way that the earth is changing. In the past, there have been oil harvesting practices that hurt ecology by polluting marine environments, such as in the case of an approximately 80 million gallon spill by Russian oilers and an 11 million gallon spill in the Exxon-Valdez oil spill. The companies were forced to pay reparations as a result of legal action taken against them in those cases and others, but the Inupiaq desire the preservation of their way of life over legal payouts. Spills can cause food sources to either die or ingest potentially harmful toxins, and the people grow more concerned about the safety and practicality of continuing to use game from the sea for subsistence,⁴⁷ but to give that up is to give up a core part of their identity and to abandon the earth that God has commanded them to care for. There have also been stringent policy improvements concerning oil practices as a result of Native Alaskan activism, but the indigenous peoples still keep a close watch on the oil companies out of fear that if they do not, those who wish to profit from their land will not be courteous of it.

Therefore, to be a modern Inupiaq is to advocate for decreased harm to the environment and increased preservation, and to be a modern Inupiaq Christian is to use the Bible to support these claims. As mentioned before, they have received reparations for the damage done by sloppy oil companies, but they continue to participate in organized protests against drilling and fight for the rights to oil-rich areas.⁴⁸ There are organizations such as the Alaska Conservation

⁴⁷ Minority Rights Group International.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

Foundation that fundraise, lobby, and introduce initiatives designed to promote ecological preservation.⁴⁹ Some even engage in performance and visual art to raise ecological awareness.⁵⁰

CONCLUSION

Respect for other beings is at the core of much traditional Inupiaq action. This is partially necessary for survival. The community must maintain good relationships in order to function well in a dangerous climate, and they must respect the community leaders who have the power to aid that process. They must also treat animals and the environment with honor in order to navigate the land safely and ensure that productive hunting practices may continue. Without careful measures to ensure that all is honored in the way that it should be, the Inupiat way of life would die.

This cultural necessity goes beyond mere pragmatism, though. Proper respect and the practices that it necessitates are an integral part of the very identity of the Inupiat. By finding commonality in the respect shown by the Inupiat and in the way that Christians conceptualize the world, the Inupiat and Christian missionaries were able to build a cross-cultural bridge that facilitated their adoption of Christian beliefs. Furthermore, Christianity has taken root in such a way that it contributes to cultural preservation in key ways.

⁴⁹ Alaska Conservation Foundation, "Mission and Values," *AlaskaConservation.org*, 2018, <https://alaskaconservation.org/foundation-work/mission/>, last accessed April 12, 2018.

⁵⁰ Adams.

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