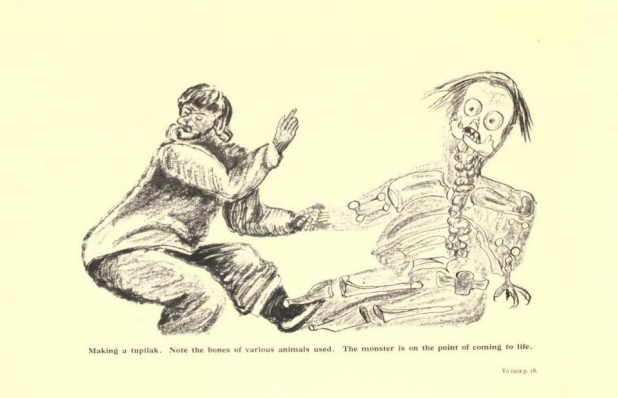
Seeking Environmental Knowledge from an Inuit Shaman

Shane McCorristine

Summary

During his 1821–23 Arctic expedition British commander William Edward Parry relied on Inuit shamans and their extensive geographical knowledge to survey the unknown and rather hostile environment of the Canadian Arctic and to seek the Northwest Passage. In one instance, the expedition's explorers consulted a shaman who correctly told them that their ships would not be able to reach their destination due to the quantity of ice and would then return home. This forecast became true when the expedition was repelled by heavy ice and snow and had to leave the Canadian Arctic. Episodes of geographical consultations with local shamans by British officers point to a more complex relationship between imperialism, exploration, and indigenous environmental knowledge. Furthermore, this relationship can be linked to broader ambivalent attitudes and cultures of curiosity in western encounters with "the supernatural" in the Arctic environment.

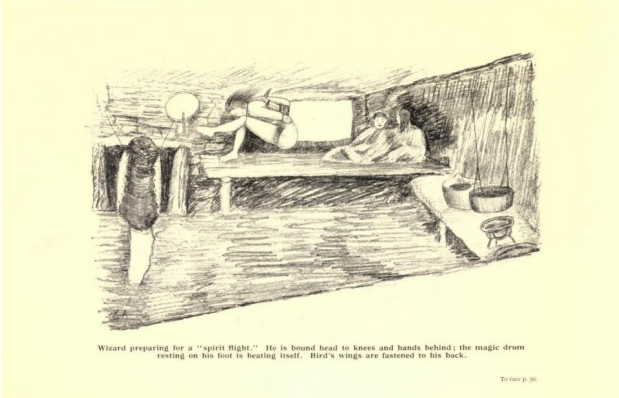
By and large, British Arctic explorers lacked local knowledge of the environments through which they passed and, consequently, sometimes consulted Inuit shamans, whose geographical knowledge was known to be extensive. That these consultations could be made either in the formal atmosphere of the ship with maps and charts or during a shamanic séance in an indigenous hut is significant. Throughout the nineteenth century explorers derided shamanism as a superstition, yet at the same time remained fascinated by the shamanic séance.



Making a Tupilak

Drawing from Knud Rasmussen's Eskimo Folk-tales, to face p. 18
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Wizard preparing for a "spirit flight"

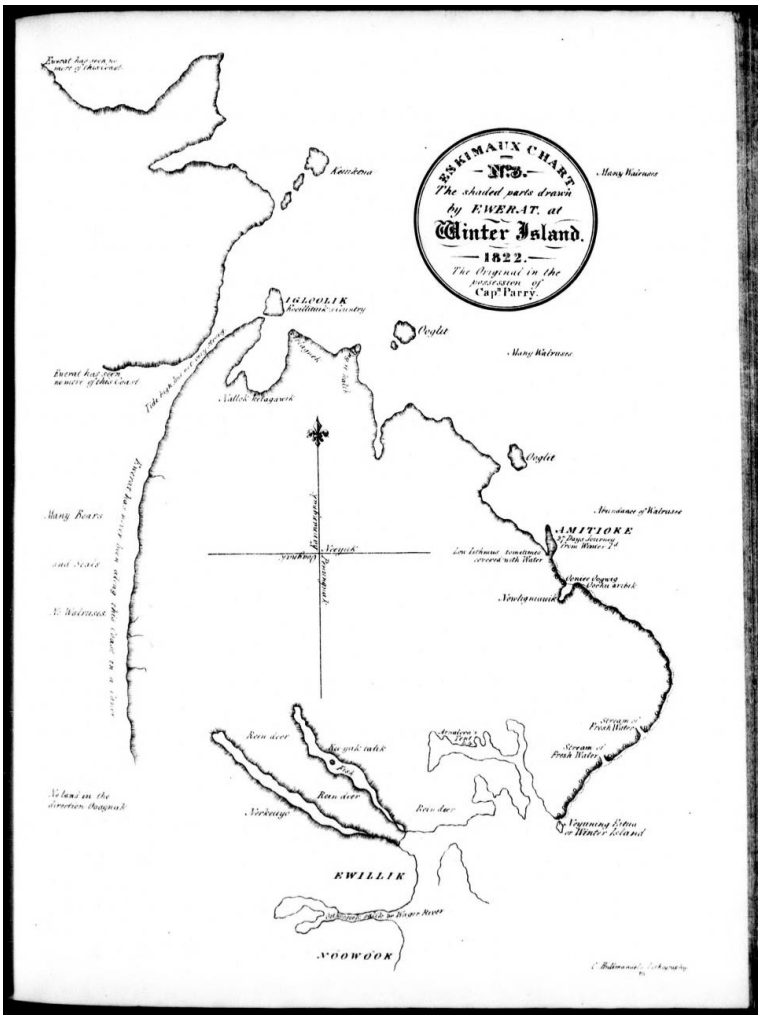
Drawing from Knud Rasmussen's *Eskimo Folk-tales*, to face p. 50
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For example, during an 1821–23 expedition to seek the Northwest Passage, Lieutenant William H. Hooper

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described how he asked an *Iglulingmiut* shaman, Toolemak, to perform "some of the ceremonies of Angetkokism." Despite Hooper's scepticism of Toolemak's "conjurations," he wanted the shaman to find out if the expedition's ships could achieve a Northwest Passage. Following some chanting, Toolemak contacted his helping spirit [*tuurngaq*] (calling upon the British officers "to become his auxiliaries" in the process), who answered that their ships would not be able to reach their destination due to the quantity of ice and would then "return to Kabloona-noona" [white man's land].



William Edward Parry, *Eskimaux chart, no.3*. In William Edward Parry, *Journal of a Second Voyage for the Discovery of a North-West Passage from the Atlantic to the Pacific*, 1822.

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This expedition, commanded by William Edward Parry, was indeed repelled by the ice at Fury and Hecla Strait and then departed the Canadian Arctic. Incidents such as this serve to remind us that Inuit and British cosmologies frequently overlapped, and for both communities the point of these séances was not just to display supernatural powers but to fulfill requests for environmental information. Geographical consultations with shamans, and the increasing appearance of British officers in these visions points to a more complex image of the relationship between imperialism, exploration, and indigenous environmental knowledge. Furthermore this

relationship can be linked to broader ambivalent attitudes and cultures of curiosity in western encounters with "the supernatural."

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Further readings:

- McCorristine, Shane. *Spectres of the Self: Thinking About Ghosts and Ghost-Seeing in England, 1750–1920.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.
- McCorristine, Shane. "The Supernatural Arctic: An Exploration." *Nordic Journal of English Studies* 9, no. 1 (2010): 47–70.

Related links:

- McCorristine, Shane. "Sounds in the Sky: Listening for the Aurora Borealis at Fort Chipewyan." *Arcadia*, 2012. https://doi.org/10.5282/rcc/3681

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Shane McCorristine is an interdisciplinary historian with interests in cultural, social, literary, and environmental history, currently focusing on embodiment and disembodiment in Victorian Arctic exploration.

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