**People of the North / Native Lives**

**Community Life / Native Traditions**

# SHAMANS

**By Tricia Brown**

A discussion of shamans, or medicine men, and their practices, can conjure a mixed reaction in every Alaska Native culture. Through oral tradition and personal experience, most are familiar with the supernatural powers that certain individuals were given—power to heal illnesses, deliver prophetic messages, communicate with animals, to warn or protect. They could enter trancelike state in which their spirits left their physical bodies and visited other places, then returned to tell what they saw. Some claimed they'd flown to the moon and back.

The worst of the medicine men are remembered as arrogant individuals who lorded over their people through demanding, threatening, or abusive behavior. Often they bullied villagers into submission. Some even had the power to kill by cursing or hexing anyone who crossed them. Because 19th-centuries Christian missionaries rejected the work of medicine men as demonic, many Native people who were converted to Christianity rejected shamanism too. Those feelings linger.

And while Natives all over Alaska are reviving or continuing practices such as speaking and teaching Native languages, dancing, mask-making, and potlatching, the ways of

shamans are not celebrated so openly. Nearly everyone agrees on this: some were evil, some were good. Not unlike memories of some missionaries.

In some regions, the two belief systems merged to become a third unique set of beliefs. Author Margaret B. Blackman, in writing her biography of Barrow elder Sadie Brower Neakok, described how missionary teachings among the Iñupiaq were viewed.

"Despite the eventual demise of the shamans," Blackman wrote, "the new Christianity was interpreted within a context of shamanism. Missionaries were believed, like shamans, to acquire their power directly from a spirit source—God, in this case—and, like shamans, some missionaries were deemed effective and others, feckless."

In 1854, while engaged in a search for the lost expedition of British explorer Sir John Franklin, Mate William R. Hobson traveled through Alaska's northernmost coastal villages. In one, Hobson watched as a shaman healed a man with a respiratory illness. Author Dorothy J. Ray, in her book *Eskimos of the Bering Sea*, paraphrased Hobson's story from his journal: "The old shaman seated himself before the fire in a crouching position and for an hour and half shook a skin and uttered 'strange gutteral sounds' over and over without changing his position the whole time. Later, a woman lifted and lowered the patient's head by means of a stick attacked to a skin band tied round his head."

In his unpublished autobiography, *The Northernmost American*, Charles Brower wrote that in the winter of 1900-01, he witnessed the shamans of the Barrow area making a "last attempt to keep some control over the Eskimo."

"[When their attempts failed], they tried another track saying they had received messages from above, telling them of a wonderful new religion better for the Eskimos than the white man's. For awhile each had a small following, eventually they lost all their prestige. . . . This year we lost the last of the devil doctors." One, he said, had converted to Christianity; the other committed suicide.

That same year of 1901, Tom and Ellen Lopp were working in Wales as teachers hired by a missionary association. Unlike most Christians of their time, the Lopps were reluctant to force their entire belief system on the aboriginal people around them, and respectfully referred to the shamans as "Doctors." Ellen Lopp's letters to family members in Minnesota and Massachusetts were collected and published by her granddaughter, Kathleen Lopp Smith, with husband Verbeck Smith, in *Ice Window: Letters from a Bering Strait Village, 1892-1902.* The shamans of Wales were still freely practicing their medicine even a decade after the Lopps began working in the village. In a 1901 letter to a family member in the United States, Ellen Lopp's brother Charlie described the day he was invited into a house to watch a doctor at work:

"I made sure that the folks of the house would not be offended or disturbed by my coming in at such a time and then went in. Kitsin, the man of the house who is very sick now, was sitting on the floor in the middle of the room. The old doctor was sitting beside

Kitsin, drumming for all he was worth but keeping a regular Eskimo song tune. He was accompanied all the time by his wife, who sat in the same position directly behind him, singing. When I came in, the old doctor did not open his eyes but the others all looked at me and beckoned me to a place on the floor in the back of the room with some others of the family. I lay down on the floor with my head on my elbow and for an hour and a half I enjoyed myself thoroughly. At certain times, the music would stop and the doctor would pray, with his head between his feet, to the spirit. Sometimes he would dance. Three times he managed to get the evil spirit into his mouth and blow it out the door. This sent the old fellow into contortions each time. At times they would all change places. Altogether it was a fine time."

Well more than a century after Christianity began its spread across Alaska, feelings about shamanism remain passionate. Some Athabascan elders in Minto were inflamed as recently as the 1990s when visiting puppeteers presented a children's show at the local school. The visitors were bewildered by the angry outburst of one elder during the show. They could not know that even though decades had passed, several of the offended elders easily remembered how the cruelest shamans used puppets or figurines to communicate threatening messages and exert control over local people.

The grandson of a shaman, and the son of a medical assistant, George Krause was a Bristol Bay area elder who died in 2003 at age 77. When Krause was growing up in Aleknagik in the 1930s, his father worked assisting the medical staff at Kanakanak Hospital near Dillingham.

“He knew how to doctor pretty good,” Krause said in 1998, when he was living at the Dillingham Senior Center. “[My father] had a lot of medicine. But my grandfather on my mother’s side was The Best Native Medicine Man There Ever Was!” He placed emphasis on each word as he spoke.

“I think Kavalila was his Russian name. Georgie Ilutsik, just before he died, told me that he watched him. . . . They brought this woman who was so sick, she couldn’t walk. They had to carry her on a dried sealskin. Four people carried her up there and put her up by my grandad up there on the grass. And he felt on her stomach, and he took a feather, a bird feather, put saliva on it and went like this on her stomach.” Krause made a sweeping motion, his hand like a knife.

“And it fell open. And he reached in there and felt around, and took something out. And he put saliva on his hand and went like this,” Krause said, holding his hand in a karate chop again and drawing it across an invisible patient. “That incision just shut and there was no scar. That woman got up and walked around. That’s the kind of man he was.

“And he could fly. There were a few that could fly. They could go someplace else. When Katmai blew up, he flew over, over this way to find out if any kind of travel was possible. He came back and reported that there were about six inches of ash on top of the ground. If you had reindeer and you were driving them, they wouldn’t be able to eat. And if you had dog teams, you couldn’t get over the pass with your sled. It was just like sand.”

Krause, who was a Christian, explained that while many shamans lorded over the people in their villages, not all were bad men.

“Well, there’s two powers, you know, all Christians know: thepower of evil and the power of the Holy Ghost,” Krause said. “I believe that to be the truth. That the power of the Holy Ghost was with certain people, even in those days, the days of my grandad. Because [otherwise] there was no way they could do that good. The medicine people that I knew after those people passed away, everybody was scared of them because they were of the evil. They could put a spell on you and make you die. So when this medicine man came from this area to Kulukak, everybody gave him everything he wanted. Dog sleds, dogs, harnesses, dog food, anything that he pointed at and wanted. They were just deathly afraid.”

Krause said his grandfather was a good man who never abused his power. He didn’t necessarily ask for supernatural abilities, he just had them.

“He was recognized as such, and I guess he had the power to heal whenever he wanted or whenever it was called for. Like the disciples, you can’t call on that power for your own use, for your own gratification. It has to be used when God calls for it to be used . . . for good work, good healing.”

Born in 1881, John “Savokgenaq” Savok grew up in the Norton Sound area, descended from shamans on both sides of his family tree. He was introduced to Christianity through his young wife, Lily Egaq, and devoted his adult life to supporting her work in the

Covenant Church, ministering as a Native pastor to other Iñupiaq people. Their son, Fred Savok, wrote about his parents and the cultural history of the area in his 2004 book titled *Jesus and the Eskimo*.

"Although I use the term 'shaman' in this book, I want to clarify that the Eskimo did not worship the Devil," Savok wrote. "Satan and evil spirits were well known, welcomed and feared by the Eskimo at the same time. American Natives who know the difference between shaman and demonized person would rather use the term 'demonized' instead of the word 'shaman' in reference to a person with an evil supernatural power.

"As a boy, my father was initiated into the life of a Shaman should he desire that prestige in the Eskimo land," he wrote. "His family line, as far back as I can determine, were 'powerful' people. They were leaders in their communities. But the 'buck' stopped with my father, John. All he needed to do was to ask the demonic spirit, who constantly followed him, for help to become an evil doctor. To have the help of the Devil in everyday life of the Eskimo was that easy to acquire and get into. But like any other spirits, they do not impose themselves and enter any person. They must be invited, so to speak, and their help welcomed before a person can become demonized."

Shamanism in all its forms has not disappeared among Alaska's Natives. However, because of certain stigmas still attached to the negative aspects of the "old ways," most who practice shamanism today quietly exercise their special gifts.

((Sidebar))

**Supernatural Travel**

**By Fred Savok, Iñupiaq**

For some years, hunting conditions were not good in the far North, where the weather was harsh and dangerous. Even ptarmigan and animals were scarce on land. For strange reasons, even fish in the lakes and rivers were hard to find. Sea mammals were few out on the ocean. Hunting conditions like these could well mean starvation in any area. The only food supply left was in the family food caches. Food rationing, known so well to the Eskimo, will only reach into nothing. Before the food source was gone, the Village Chief would call a special meeting to discuss the problem. Then, as a last resort, a Shaman would be asked to make a survey of both land and sea for animals that can be hunted for food.

After an agreement was made with the worker of the supernatural, word of the coming event spread throughout the village quickly. Meals were served and eaten a little early. Home chores were done before darkness covered the village. Necessary paraphernalia needed by the village's superman was made ready in the *qasgi* before nightfall. Then all the women and children begin to gather at the *qasgi* where the men folk already were. People greeted one another in hushed tones as each found a place to sit on the floor.

Everything is ready. Now, let us join my father, Savok, a young lad who related the story to us, as it happened so long ago.

“Now the moment has come! The Shaman stood up and viewed his audience and slowly picked up a dampened seal-gut rainwear parka, and slipped it over his head, and very slowly put it on. Emphasizing each movement to impress the onlookers. Seeing these movements the audience seemed to freeze. No one was moving or talking. All eyes watched the solitary figure in the center of the room. He now faced the large coil of rawhide rope on the floor, lower end of which is tied securely to a post. Finding the top end of a strong rope, he tied it tightly around his waist. Having done this, he motioned to the person close to the oil lamp to snuff it out. With the light out now, people could hear chanting in a soft voice. Was the crescendo quicken and build up, they could hear footsteps of the dancer. Singing as he danced, he found the passageway out of the building. His motionless audience followed his movements in the dark until they could not hear his singing voice any longer in the distance.

“Then someone lit the oil lamp. Instead of a large coil of rope and a dancer on the floor, only rope end tied to the post can be seen. With other people, I follow the rawhide line outside. The line led towards the ocean ice. However, we had no trouble following the line on the snow. Before we found the end of the line, we stopped. Here the line went into the ice. And it looked like the ice had frozen with the line there. No cracks on the ice whatsoever. And yet, this is the same line that was coiled on the floor of the *qasgi*.

“Without a shadow of doubt, the Shaman had entered the ocean water right here and there through the water. The younger ran hard on the hard snow and slide on glare ice back and forth. Lots of fun! But their fun was cut short because the older start walking back toward the warm house. Nearing the building the y could hear loud talking and laughing.

“In the *qasgi*, the people took this occasion to visit no only as a group of men but with their wives as well. The children attentively listened to stories and jokes and laugh. Especially the joking cousins, who were mercilessly hitting each other hard with words. This is the way pent-up emotions and frustrations were aired out. A good practice to help someone who might be suffering from mental problems. A good medicine to pull someone up from doldrums. As soon as someone noticed, the surveyor is just about to enter the house, the noise in the building stopped and the crowd waited.

“The Shaman, still tied around his waist with the line slowly enters. He does not look cold. His clothes are not wet. He looks exactly like he did at the beginning of the performance. His report was not good. The future looks bleak, to say the least.”

Having heard this more than once from my father, I try to relate it to you as closely as I remember it.

— Excerpted from *Jesus and the Eskimo: How the Man of the Sky Brought the Light to My People*. 