

Scientists predict that within just 30 years there will be no ice at the North Pole during summer.

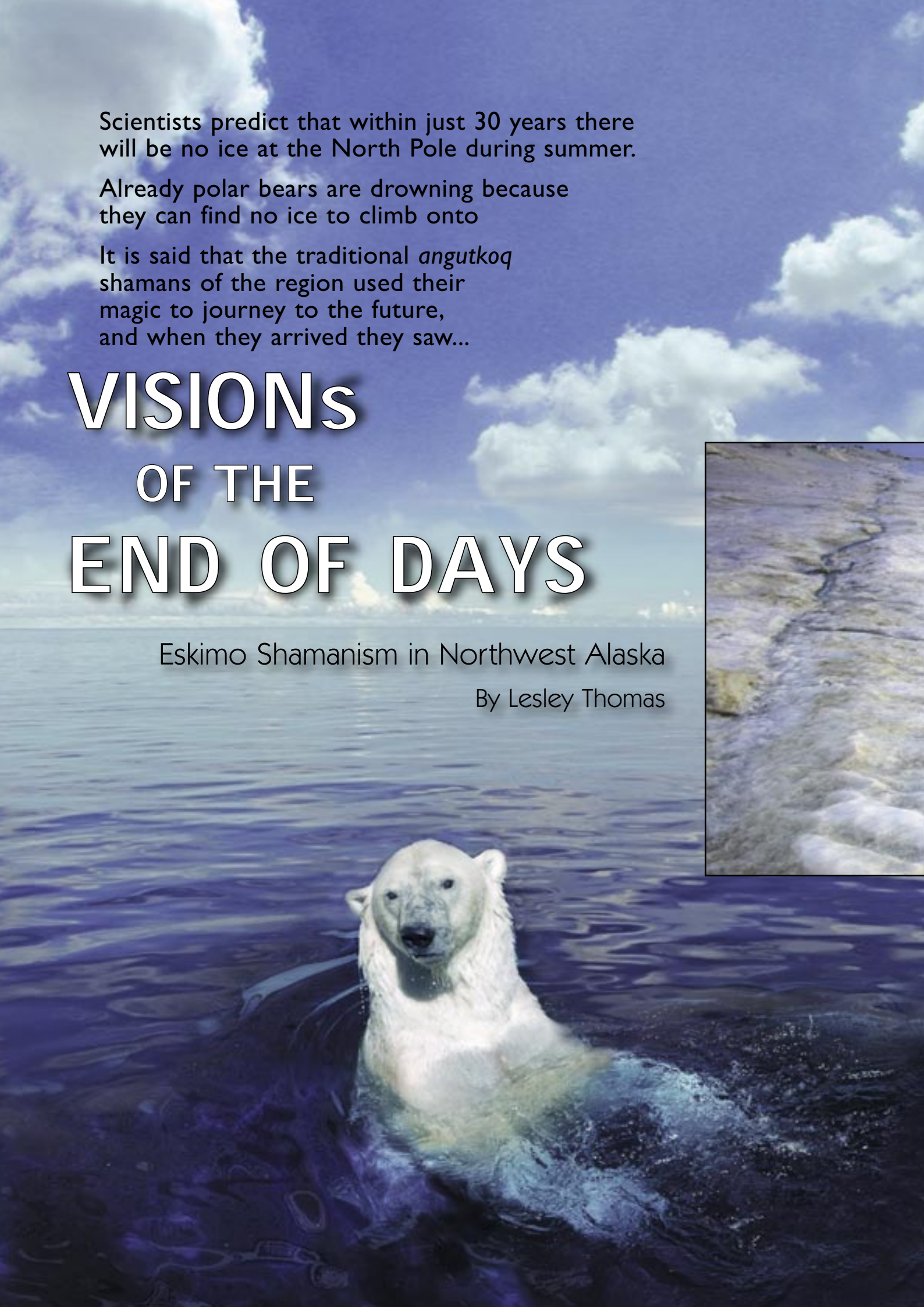
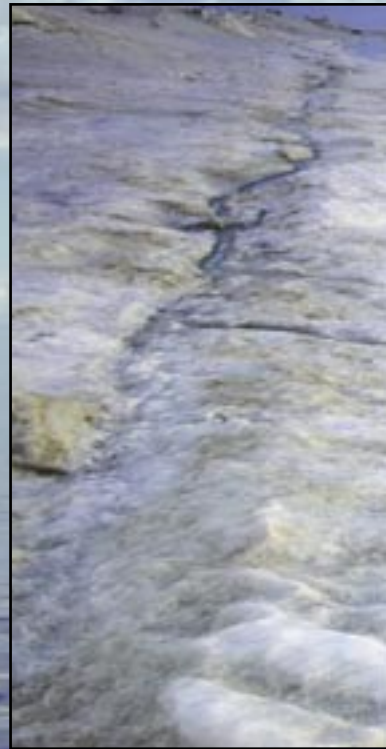
Already polar bears are drowning because they can find no ice to climb onto

It is said that the traditional *angutkoq* shamans of the region used their magic to journey to the future, and when they arrived they saw...

# VISIONS OF THE END OF DAYS

Eskimo Shamanism in Northwest Alaska

By Lesley Thomas



As a child I moved to an Inupiat village on the Bering Strait coast between North America and Siberia. My assimilation, and that of my brothers, with the local people was encouraged by my mother, who had married into the culture. With Inupiaq elders and peers around me, and because I was of an impressionable age, I took on their values; it was easy because my mother's Sami-Norse family had similar earth-based values to the culture I now found myself living in.

Several of my brothers married Inupiaq women, and one brother married into the nearby Siberian Yupik culture, and from all these relatives I learned more. I am no lettered expert, nor can I speak for

Many still live off the land in tiny villages up and down the vast coast. They are making international news these days due to melting pack-ice, thawing permafrost, drowning polar bears. Their subsistence ways, which have survived intact through the last 150 years of colonisation, are now in great danger.

#### LIVING WITH THE LAND

Alaskan Eskimos are traditionally animistic. Before contact with European culture, they had complex maritime societies rich in resources, though subject to famine due to natural animal fluctuations. Semi-nomadic, in winter they collected in villages, and in summer dispersed across the land. They traded afar, and

ceremonies they stripped naked and were bound with rope as they lay in foetal positions, and their souls swam to the bottom of the sea and tunnelled to the Underworld.

Male shamans gave symbolic birth to animals; women took spirit husbands. All shamans initiated to the path in terrifying dismemberments and ego-deaths. They divined with oracle bones, dreams and auguries, found game to hunt and hunters who had got lost in the vast wild lands, changed the

my grandparents lived through so many changes



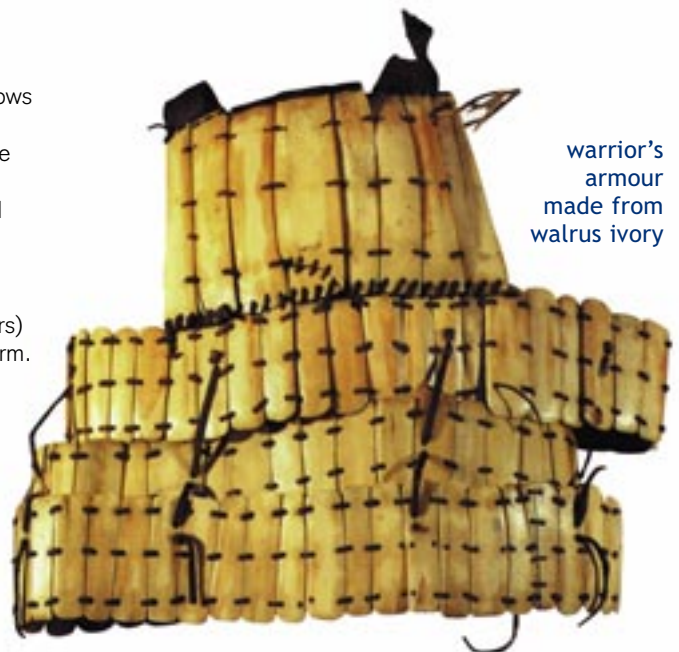
arctic people as a whole as I am white, and there is a great diversity among the tribes, villages and individuals of the Far North. Yet for forty years I've been kindly taught and have an insider perspective. It is out of this background - and my own bookish research - that I don my Western hat and presume to write about Native spirituality in Northwest Alaska.

The area has three Inuit cultures: Inupiaq, Siberian Yupik and Yup'ik. (The adjacent Athabaskan peoples are unrelated). Unlike the Inuit of Canada and Greenland, and of the Russian Far East, most members of these tribes use the name *Eskimo* and don't consider it derogatory.

gave battle in full-scale armour, made of slatted caribou ribs or walrus ivory, with walrus hide shields, powerful muskox horn bows and with specialised martial arts.

Shamans, *angutkoq*, were the spiritual leaders and sometimes head chiefs of the people. Good shamans helped the community keep in harmony with the earth, the animals and spirits, and evil sorcerers used their *qilya* (powers) for personal gain or to cause harm.

They donned the skins of the loon bird, and drummed and chanted to enter ecstatic states to fly across the land, to the moon and into the future. Some flew on sleds drawn by geese. In some of their



warrior's armour made from walrus ivory



Tupilak spirit fetish carved from walrus ivory

Today hunters might go online, use GPS, and speak English, and yet still have their legs bridged over the crack in the ice between the ancient and the new.

People engage in a telepathic prayer-like communion with life forms, elders still have an intimate relationship with the wild animals and plants.



weather, levitated, used telekinesis and sleight of hand, brought back souls, consulted and beseeched the dead, spirits and gods, passed through walls, saw in the dark and deep to the bones of things in 'x-ray vision', turned invisible, and shape-shifted.

Like yogis, adepts controlled their metabolism and could live in suspended animation. They turned one dry fish into many to feed starving families. They healed, and they killed.

Millennia of shamanism marks the land; everywhere you wander there is a story attached about *angutkoq*. My favourite place is called the Serpentine Hotsprings, where initiations took place among giant stones, considered to be portals to the spirit worlds.

Once, I visited an island where shamans had been banished for practicing evil sorcery. Everyone is in the Land of the Dead there. The ruins of the traditional earth sod houses called *ini* which lay on the island contain awesome shamanic relics which are forbidden to be taken. People avoid the island for it is haunted.

Stories about malevolent shamans who took revenge on those who treated them cruelly when they were poor orphan kids, or wizard wars that drove away animals and destroyed the land. Virgin witches cast spells on hunters and brought the dead back to life; old grandmother witches took revenge when they were neglected or disrespected.

#### A CULTURE IN CRISIS

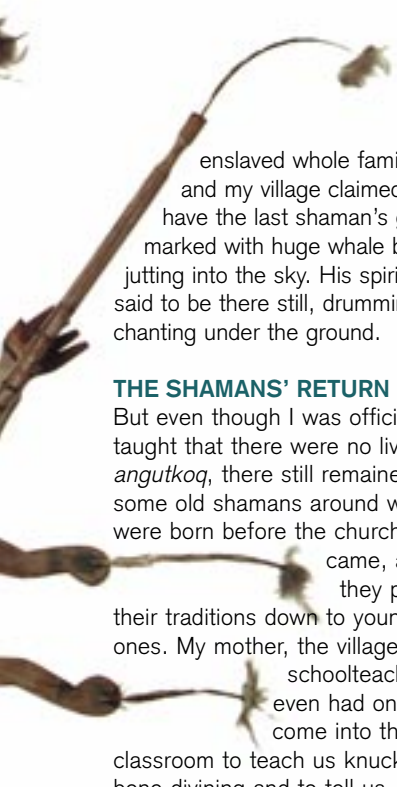
In my childhood village a European-introduced, Satan-fearing Lutheranism held sway. Anything that smacked of shamanism was outlawed when the missionaries and government officials took over the region. Their goal was to force assimilation to their Western ways. It was during a chaotic time of alien invasions of prospectors and whalers, famine, species loss, bad weather, and dislocation. Epidemics killed 90% to 100% in many villages, especially elders, together with their vast databanks of knowledge - and shamans were mostly old. Alcohol, unknown before European



contact, destroyed the will of the hunters, whose drinking binges replaced the shaman-led séances.

The *angutkoq* failed to save people or bring back exterminated species, and so lost their status. The missionaries who supplanted them abolished ceremonies and myths, and traditional gender and marital roles, childrearing practices, nomadic and communal living. They had people burn the drums, masks and the men's lodges, coercing families to live above ground in shacks instead of the warm *ini* that represented the womb of the earth. They kidnapped children to send them to boarding schools and whipped them for speaking their own language. The fur trade and a huge military presence undermined more of the aboriginal ways, and the oil industry and satellite TV were soon to make their own profound effects. Cultural genocide is not too strong a name for what happened.

And so with the *angutkoq* demonised and their shamanic culture destroyed, surprisingly many elders felt glad about the shamans' loss of authority - they were gone, and good riddance! It may be the white man's anti-shamanic propaganda, or the effect of the hard and vulnerable times that the people had lived through, but for whatever reason, the shamans came to be feared, and now they were gone. The old people didn't romanticise their past. Certainly some shamans had abused their powers, turning into warlords who



enslaved whole families, and my village claimed to have the last shaman's grave, marked with huge whale bones jutting into the sky. His spirit is said to be there still, drumming and chanting under the ground.

### THE SHAMANS' RETURN

But even though I was officially taught that there were no living *angutkoq*, there still remained some old shamans around who were born before the church came, and they passed their traditions down to younger ones. My mother, the village schoolteacher, even had one come into the classroom to teach us knuckle bone divining and to tell us shaman-hero epics, of which I diligently took notes.

Everyone seemed to have some great-aunt or grandfather who practiced some of the old ways. Healers known as 'feelers' or 'bone doctors,' who know medicine based on organ manipulation and herbs, began to be employed by health clinics and now are highly respected. But the *angutkoq*, who delve into spirit, still operate in relative secrecy, and without a salary.

There are places, more remote villages that were less colonised, where they are not so secretive about their ways. I have a friend from such a place who revealed that she is a 'whale caller' - a woman shaman who connects to the whales psychically, asking for their sacrifice. Another friend told me her father used to carry her on his spirit flights over the land to search for game. My stepfather even now admits he would have been an *angutkoq*, as he had such a calling and it was in his family line, but instead he went to missionary school and got a Masters in education.

The *angutkoq* aside, an everyday animistic or shamanic way of knowing lives on in the Arctic. The people resisted assimilation and the old animistic values, or *ukpiqtiqagniq*, persisted in practical ways, such as enchanting an old whale-oil lamp so that it would never blow out, or nowadays enchanting a snow-machine engine so it never breaks down.

Sometimes the old ways merged with Christianity too, like they have

with all the cultures Christianity has touched.

Faith in Jesus is not always antagonistic to a sense of sacred unity with the earth, a belief in reincarnation, in animal souls or even in Sila, the mighty weather spirit. It is all fused together. My Inupiaq grandmother told me how Jesus saved her life by stopping her drinking. He appeared in the form of a red sun as it rolled over the sea, and spoke directly to her, and she was born anew (the sun, traditionally was a goddess of rebirth, and drums were built to reflect her shape).

The group confessions and testimonials at Church follow the pattern when shamans were the 'pastors', rooting out taboo breakers, and encouraging forgiveness, cleansing or purifying the self and the community, and so bringing back order and balance. Some anthropologists and my more fundamentalist relatives might argue with me about the melding of beliefs, but it is seen all over the world where indigenous peoples were missionised.

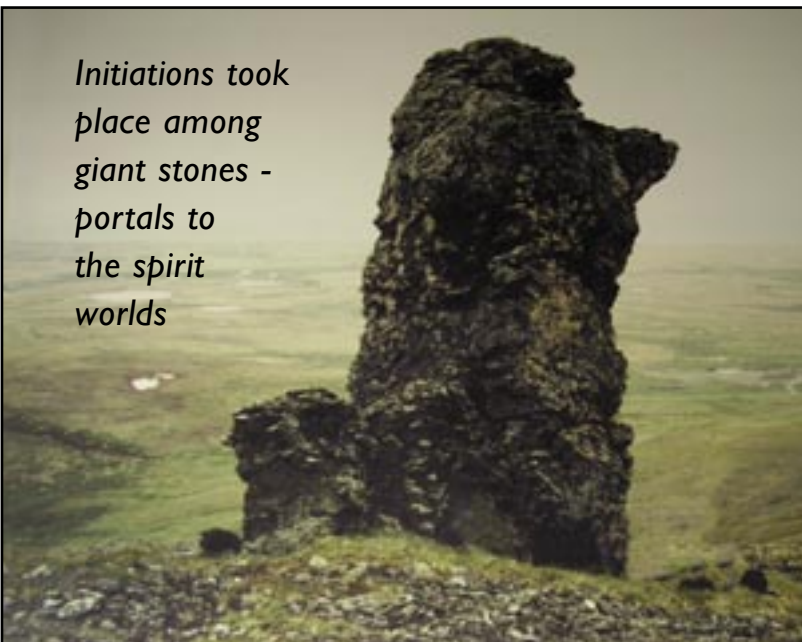
Another place you can see them is in the *Ilitkusiq*, the codified list of Inupiaq values posted at heritage centres and even in my parent's bathroom:

*'Treat animals (and elders) with respect; remember that all things are connected; be patient, know that not all things are visible and we can't understand everything'. At the end of the list is 'God is in all things and provides for us.'*

### A WAY OF RESPECT

Today hunters and gatherers might go online, use GPS, and speak English, and yet still have their legs bridged over the crack in the ice between the ancient and the new - one foot still planted in the old ways. People engage in a telepathic prayer-like communion with life forms, elders still have an intimate relationship with the wild animals and plants.

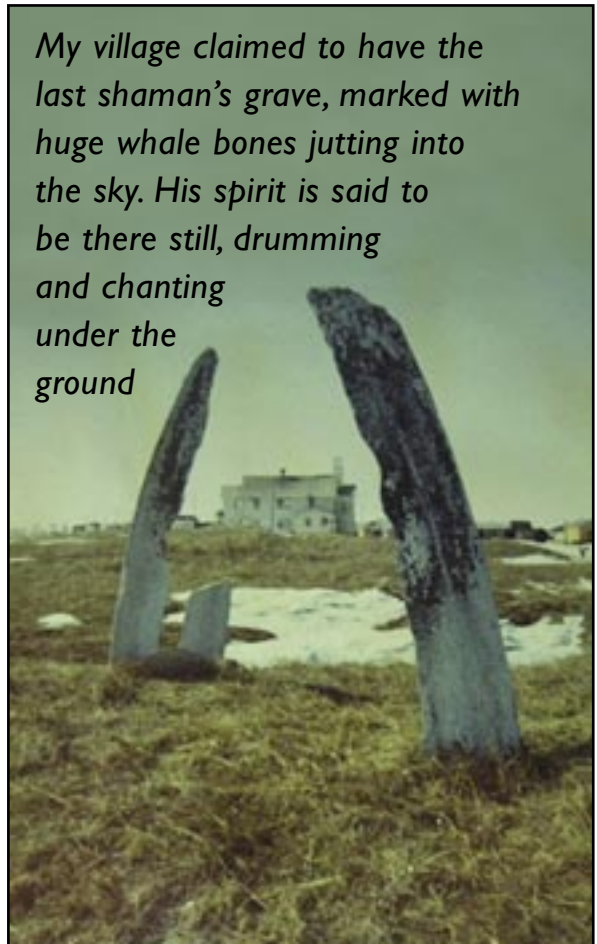
Animals are not seen as subordinate or inferior to humans, but instead are regarded as being like people, with intelligence, sensitivities and passions. In mythic times humans and creatures slipped in and out of one



*Initiations took place among giant stones - portals to the spirit worlds*

another's identities, shape-shifting, and even fell in love (it is said that some Inupiat humans were born from the union of a shaman-hero and a wolf). This unity and equality is reflected in the traditional 'transformation masks'.

All animals, including birds, are considered to have souls, and these souls are held in reverence. Although creatures are killed for food, they are not enslaved or dominated. Not only mighty animals such as bears, eagles, ravens, whales, loons, wolves and wolverines are considered to have vengeful supernatural powers, even



*My village claimed to have the last shaman's grave, marked with huge whale bones jutting into the sky. His spirit is said to be there still, drumming and chanting under the ground*



norm is to soothe and placate her with lullabies and comb her hair. If approached with tenderness, honour and respect she will relinquish the souls of the animals she cares for so they can return to earth again to be hunted so the people can continue to live.

In more recent years, things have loosened up even

more, and the holders of the old ways have been coming out of the closet as the outside world begins to alter and shows signs of a new respect for the old ways (now that outsiders have wrecked the earth). Scientists heed the elders' lore and fly them to climate change conferences; professors try to preserve the old language and with it the oral histories; dance troupes enact the ancient shamanic flights to the moon for the tourists, and native artists carve shamanic themes in their work.

While at fish camp my mother finds a dying loon near the cabin and makes its skin into a black and white pied hat. She cannot wear it or the townspeople will know she is a witch. She doesn't want to be feared, as she has devout Christian friends. But when Chukotka shamans come over from Russia to attend a conference they stay at her house and play their drums there, and soon after the loonskin hat hangs on her wall and no one gives her any grief for it.

## LIVING IN HARMONY

As I grew up and listened to the elders and my relatives, I learnt some key lessons about how to live. They taught me that the animals are all-important; they study and watch us all the time and use telepathy and magic. I also learnt that they have their own shamans and elders, are sensitive to slight, are very judgmental and will punish evil-doers (mostly by going away).

For that matter, the ocean is easily offended too, so don't tease it or it might get even with you. Don't mention the possibility of death or accidents or they may come true. When killing, don't be cruel or gloat, don't torment or cause suffering and don't waste life; take only enough for what you need (more will be provided later).

Don't orphan walrus or they turn into vengeful demons. Orcas (killer whales) who lose loved ones will wait for years to get revenge. Wolves don't like to be overhunted so only trap five in a season or they will get mad and leave the area. (You can take a few more foxes if you wish). Always leave enough for a lemming when you take seeds from her winter storage. Don't mess with an animal's home, and don't take all the berries or all the eggs from a nest. It is mean to take it all, and the generous animals won't leave you any next time.

Don't disturb the things of the little people either - the earth spirits, which are called fairies in western culture. Kill a seal or duck when it offers itself to you - refusing the gift is dishonourable.

Don't say you are going hunting, or talk about what game you plan to kill, or boast of your kills; animals won't like it.

Thank the seals and walrus and whales for their death so you can live, and give the seal you have just killed a drink of fresh water and return the bones to the sea; if you do this it will tell its relatives it was treated well, and if the seal feels okay it will come back to you again and again to be killed again and again so you can live.

Share, don't be greedy, plunder, steal or hoard. And always, always be grateful.

My stepfather warned me above all to respect the raven, polar bears and the grizzly bears. These are seen as powerful shamans in their own right, and they help human shamans as *tumaq* (spirit helpers).



**Above: summer fish camp where salmon is dried on racks to save it for times when food is less plentiful**

**Below: hunting shrine made from animal parts, stones and wood**

tiny green caterpillars, as well as the mountains, the wind, the sea, pack-ice and rivers are seen to have souls and should be respected and not dominated or challenged.

Humility towards the earth is a basic value held by the people, and when the shamans sing for help it is in a pleading way. It is true that at times a male shaman might beat the sea goddess into submission with a two foot long, club-like walrus penis, but the



In the old ways, shamans often shape-shifted into ravens and bears.

Raven was the Creator who himself was created from an effigy made by a grandmother shaman in the beginning of time. So I was taught I was not to tease or slay ravens or bother their chicks or I would have bad luck. When hunting or picking berries I was told to watch what I thought or said about bears and not say the word bear or *aklak*, since using that name would make them angry at the dishonour.

I was not even to brag that I could kill bears (which I should not be hunting anyway as a woman, nor menstruating around them either) because they are always listening and heeding from afar, even from their hibernation caves.

I got annoyed by these admonishments from the elders, because in all my days I never cared to tease animals or speak badly of them; indeed I worship animals, and yet the elders' lectures seemed to assume I would always be mean, careless and stupid. It is my white legacy. I held my tongue, as is the custom.

### THE END OF DAYS

So the most important lesson (besides heeding and respecting my elders!) was the need to take care of the animals and their sensitivities, and to be ever-aware of the consequences of each action to keep the balance, so that the animals and plants will continue to willingly offer themselves for food. If we do not do this we bring catastrophe down on ourselves, our loved ones and our community. It's not just about me and my fate; my unethical action can even affect my innocent descendants who are not yet born, long after I am dead.

Taken to the extreme, bad behaviour can lead to the punitive apocalypse which was predicted by the shaman prophets. This apocalypse follows a period where morality completely disintegrates. Animals and the weather start behaving strangely. There is chaos and famine; and finally the earth, or Sila the overgod of weather - capable of great wrath - responds by cleansing in deluges and massive flooding. All creatures and humans regardless of their innocence are killed off.

It is foretold that a few survivors will be saved by Raven, who will bring up dry land from the sea bed, and the cycle starts anew.

It is said that this has already happened, at least twice before, according to the prophecy. My Inupiat stepfather told me the old *angutkoq* flew far into the future and foresaw the invasion of the Europeans. They even saw airplanes and computers, and it was there they saw the apocalyptic end of days - the destruction of the white man's world, and eventually the ascendancy of the pure, old ways again.

And the elders see clear signs of the end of days now, with the rising of sea levels, and the loss of the protective sea-ice. Increasingly savage storms erode away the Alaskan coastline and are taking out 6,000-year-old village sites, not only the modern homes of plywood, but the old *ini* with all their ancestral bones and artifacts.

Mastodon tusks - once seen as the bones of evil monsters driven underground by shamans - are exposed as river banks collapse. Animals are indeed acting strangely and alien animals and plants have come in from southern areas. A favourite son falls through the thinning ice and is lost. Seals, walrus and whale disappear, starving polar bears eat humans - and their own kind too.

The old values have broken down with globalisation, the crack is widening, with youth tending toward corporate-consumer values, and committing sins against animals for profit. And, all too often, committing suicide. There are even rumours of disaffected youths studying black magic, and they are condemned by the elders.

There is a sense a profound unease and doom in the Far North among scientists, and people close



Yupik shaman wearing a ritual mask with a boy he has been doctoring

to the land whose lives are most impacted. My brother's old hunting mentor, a shaman, warned me, "Days are coming when you will be happy to find garbage to eat, like we did in the old times." He will be gone soon from this earth, since he is ninety, but he feels pity for us and our children.

The Alaskan arctic is in perhaps its most serious crisis yet. All the coastal villages must soon be permanently evacuated. If these impoverished communities cannot drum up the funds to move their homes further inland, they must disperse to the city. What will happen to the old spirituality then, what path will it take in the metropolises of high-end department stores and oil barons' mansions? What will happen, for that matter, to all the indigenous and coastal peoples, to all the species of the earth? The *angutkoq* might be able to tell us.

Lesley Thomas grew up in the Alaskan Arctic in an Inupiat Eskimo village and in Nome. Her Inupiat and Yupit family tradition continue to teach her traditional ways, and her interest in cross-cultural shamanism and myth began early.

She also trained in ecology, and researched the effects of oil spills on arctic salt marshes.

She is the author of 'Flight of the Goose', a novel with themes of arctic shamanism, modern indigenous culture and science (see review this issue).

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