

A Winter's Tale

“Some say the world will end in fire,
Some say ice.”

Robert Frost

A brilliant star sparkled in the arctic sky that night, casting a fiery glow across the desolate, wintery landscape. “Surely this is an omen?”, the shaman thought to himself, as he tried to make sense of the mystery. In due course, something very odd did happen--a stranger appeared.

He was a wiry man with dark, brooding eyes, but his skin was as white as the snow on his mukluks, and although he was from another land he spoke in a friendly tongue. It was not long before the stranger began to ask Umik, the village elder, some curious questions about the spirit world. Umik invited him to his igloo and in a hushed tone he described how humans were once so close to the animal world that they could not tell one another apart: all was chaos. One day his people were visited by a wanderer, a man who had the power to separate the humans and the animals, and it was this man, Umik explained, who taught his people their lore. When the wanderer had completed his task, he left and was never seen again.

A few days later, while out hunting seals, Umik asked the stranger if he could tell him a story about the spirit world of his own people. The stranger agreed. He told Umik that his world was carved by a Great Being, a spirit no man could see but who lived everywhere:

“The Great Spirit was sad there were no people on the land, so he created man from earth and gave him a woman. He put them in a garden where there was lots of food. The Great Spirit only had one law: there was one fruit they could not eat. One day an evil creature crept into the garden and persuaded them very cunningly to taste the forbidden fruit. When the

Great Spirit discovered what they had done, he cast them out of their perfect world forever.”

The stranger saw the sadness in Umik’s face, and he told him not to be upset because this was not the end of the story.

“After seeing the world suffer for many harsh winters, the Great Spirit decided to forgive his people and he sent them a gift--a child. When the child grew up he became a wise man, and even though he suffered a horrible death at the hands of his enemies he came back to life to show how everyone could live forever in a perfect world if they followed his lore.”

Umik was curious about the story, so he went to visit the shaman. The shaman listened attentively to Umik, but after a long silence he pointed out to Umik that the Inuit had always been content in their world and that as long as they treated animals with respect, whenever they surrendered their lives to the hunter, they too could live forever in the Land of the Happy Hunting Ground. Yet the shaman was a little puzzled by the stranger’s story: why, he wondered, would anyone want to kill a child who was the gift of such a great spirit?

Umik told the stranger about his encounter with the shaman and the stranger sensed that he needed to offer Umik some proof of the power of the Great Spirit, so he gave Umik a small, ivory object and told him to clasp it in his hands and speak to the Great Spirit whenever he needed help.

A few days later, when Umik was out hunting by himself on the ice, he clasped the tiny inuksuk in the palm of his hand and asked the Great Spirit to help him find a polar bear. To everybody’s surprise, Umik returned to the village that evening with the largest animal his people had ever seen. No one was more happy than the stranger, who pointed out that the ivory object he had given him was a carving of the son of the Great Spirit.

“In my world,” the stranger explained, “men have dominion over all the animals, and he who believes in the Great Spirit will never die.” Then he

added in a hushed tone, "But anyone who rejects the teachings of the Son will go to a place so hot that even the ice bergs will melt!"

Umik shuddered at the thought of no ice, yet he could not resist the stranger's magic, and all that winter he listened attentively to his miraculous tales about the spirit world.

As the darkness of the polar night slowly gave birth to the sun, it came time for the stranger to leave. To his great delight, Umik asked if he might be accepted into his spirit world. A great feast was prepared and in front of the whole village the stranger sprinkled snow on Umik's forehead.

"I shall call you Adam," he told Umik, "for you are the first man."

As final proof of his commitment, the stranger asked the village elder to eat a piece of reindeer heart--a food strictly forbidden to the Inuit--as a sign to the entire community that he would be forever separated from his former world. Umik agreed.

No sooner had they sat down in the giant igloo to celebrate Umik's new life, than the stranger informed him that this was the last supper they would eat together. Umik did not understand his words until later that evening when the stranger returned to his own igloo and let out a terrifying cry. Running outside, Umik found him lying in the snow: he had been stabbed in the heart by a sharp whale bone. Yet even as the stranger lay dying beneath the stars, he begged Umik not to take revenge for his death, exhorting him to find it in his heart to spare the life of the man who had killed him.

Sadly, the village elder buried the stranger in the frozen ground and built a giant inuksuk on top of his grave, its arms outstretched just as in the shape of the tiny, ivory cross given to him by the man with such mysterious power. True to his word, Umik did not kill the man who had murdered the stranger; instead, he banished the shaman from the village for eternity.

Umik never lost the power the stranger had given him and soon everyone in the village wanted to enter his spirit world, heralding a ritual that came to be known among the Inuit as *siqqitiq** (transforming one's life).

The years passed by and more strangers came to the village: some arrived by sea on the backs of wooden whales; others came by river in giant kayaks; and some even travelled inside the belly of great birds that screeched as they fell from the sky. Yet something else happened. The temperature grew noticeably warmer in the Arctic, the ice began to melt, and in time the polar bears became fewer and fewer in number. Eventually they were all gone. In exchange for their soul the Inuit lost their world. Only then did they come to understand that when the Northern Lights dance across the winter sky it is not the stranger buried in his grave who has come to life, but the shaman beckoning his lost children back to Eden.

Siqqitiq (meaning transforming one's life, more specifically adopting Christianity) is the ritual of converting Inuit with shamanist beliefs to Christianity. This is usually accompanied by the ritualistic consumption of foods held taboo by shamanist belief. Umik, the first Inuit evangelist, used such methods for conversion, which turned into a ritual. The practice is now rare because most Inuit are already Christians. **Siqqitiqtuq** (literally: getting into water, or wetting with water) means baptism.

Paul G. Chamberlain is a historical geographer and teaches in the School of Continuing Studies at the University of Victoria. He has travelled extensively in the Arctic.