Angalkut

Shamans in Yup'ik Oral Tradition

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CALISTA EDUCATION AND CULTURE

University of Alaska Press
FAIRBANKS

Published by University of Alaska Press
An imprint of University Press of Colorado
1580 North Logan Street, Suite 660
PMB 39883
Denver, Colorado 80203-1942

Printed in the United States of America

The University Press of Colorado is a proud member of Association of University Presses.

The University Press of Colorado is a cooperative publishing enterprise supported, in part, by Adams State University, Colorado School of Mines, Colorado State University, Fort Lewis College, Metropolitan State University of Denver, University of Alaska Fairbanks, University of Colorado, University of Denver, University of Northern Colorado, University of Wyoming, Utah State University, and Western Colorado University.

∞ This paper meets the requirements of the ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992 (Permanence of Paper).

ISBN: 978-1-64642-729-1 (hardcover)
ISBN: 978-1-64642-730-7 (paperback)
ISBN: 978-1-64642-731-4 (ebook)
https://doi.org/10.5876/9781646427314

The Yup'ik and English text in part 2 of the ePUB edition is arranged so that each Yup'ik paragraph is followed by its English translation, whereas the print and PDF editions present the English translations to the left of the original Yup'ik text.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Fienup-Riordan, Ann author | Rearden, Alice author | Meade, Marie author
Title: Angalkut/shamans in Yup'ik oral tradition / Ann Fienup-Riordan, Alice Rearden, Marie Meade.
Description: Fairbanks : University of Alaska Press, [2025] | Series: Calista education and culture | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2024058213 (print) | LCCN 2024058214 (ebook) | ISBN 9781646427291 hardcover | ISBN 9781646427307 paperback | ISBN 9781646427314 ebook
Subjects: LCSH: Yupik Eskimos—Alaska, Southwest—Social life and customs | Oral tradition—Alaska, Southwest | Yupik languages—Alaska, Southwest | Yupik Eskimos—Alaska, Southwest—Rites and ceremonies | Shamans—Alaska, Southwest
Classification: LCC E99.E7 F437 2025 (print) | LCC E99.E7 (ebook) | DDC 979.8/4004971—dc23/eng/20250328
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2024058213
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2024058214

Cover image by Jeffrey Dykes, Peabody Essex Museum

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1

Kalikam Ayagnera Introduction

In the early 1900s, *angalkut* (shamans) were ubiquitous in southwest Alaska. Born in 1903, Nelson Island elder Tim Agagtak (July 1985:37) recalled: "Their ancestors came from the ancient time. This business of shamanism has existed beginning from the first people." Indeed, shamanism has been practiced by men and women in southwest Alaska, as well as northern Eurasia and North America, for centuries. The derivation of the word *angalkuq* is unclear, although Thalbitzer (1930) suggested that it may be related to the Inuit word for mother's brother—*angak*. The term "shaman" comes from the Tungus word *saman* and has become a central theoretical concept in the study of religion (Eliade 1970; Laugrand and Oosten 2012:33). The literature on shamanism is vast, for both Alaska as well as other parts of the Arctic. Our intention is to contribute to that literature through a fine-grained presentation of unique first-person narratives rarely recorded or shared.[1]

While differing in important ways, Inuit and Yup'ik shamanic traditions—spread from the Bering Sea coast all across the Canadian Arctic and Greenland—share distinctive features. All across the Arctic, the shaman is viewed as someone who possesses the ability to locate animals, change the weather, and heal the sick, often with the assistance of helping spirits (Merkur 1991; Laugrand and Oosten 2012:xvii, 33).

Although contemporary healing practices still make use of shamanic techniques, including "poking" and the laying on of hands, the last generation of men and women recognized as shamans in southwest Alaska has passed away, as has the last generation of women and men with firsthand experiences of *angalkut*. Susie Angaiak (March 2007:1476) of Tununak mused: "When I think about what we experienced in the early days, it's like a dream. But we know what it's like since we experienced it." Elders also share what they heard from their own elders. Frank Andrew (October 2001:181) began one recording session with the disclaimer: "I speak of things that I heard from elders. . . . I cannot fabricate things, but I only reveal things that I have heard."

How and Why We Work Together: Topic-Specific Gatherings[2]

In 1997, Calista (the for-profit corporation for southwest Alaska) asked Mark John, born and raised on Nelson Island, to lead and reinvigorate the Calista Elders Council (CEC). CEC grew and thrived under John's leadership, taking on the job of documenting traditional knowledge in a part of Alaska rich in language and oral history. In 2014, CEC was reorganized and renamed Calista Education and Culture, and the "new CEC" remains the primary heritage organization in the Yukon-Kuskokwim delta region, a lowland delta the size of Kansas and the traditional homeland of Yup'ik people. At present

https://doi.org/10.5876/9781646427314.c001

the region's population of over 26,000 (the largest Native population in Alaska) lives scattered in 56 villages and the regional center in Bethel. Today this huge region is cross-cut by historical and administrative differences, including three dialect groups, three major Christian denominations, six school districts, two census areas, and three ANCSA (Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act) regional corporations.

The lack of commercially valuable resources (i.e., whales, fur bearers, mineral deposits) meant that the region attracted a resident non-Native population relatively late compared to other parts of Alaska. The first non-Natives to settle in significant numbers were Christian missionaries beginning in the 1880s (Fienup-Riordan 1990b, 1991, 2000; Oswalt 1963, 1973). Schools and churches were not established in many lower coastal communities until the 1930s. The elders we worked with were raised in small settlements where residents spoke the Yup'ik language and continued to harvest foods from the land and sea, as had their ancestors before them. Among the most significant changes in the twentieth century was the abandonment of these small settlements (ranging in size from 5 to 30 persons) and the gathering of people into 56 permanent villages between 200 and 1,200 persons. While these villages may seem small by urban standards, they represent unprecedented population concentration in the delta environment, with direct consequences for community viability.

As people gather closer together, animals and fish, although still abundant, are more distant. Now men often need to travel miles, either by gasoline-hungry snowmobile or skiff, to set their nets and traps. Many people still harvest from the fishing sites their parents used when they were young, but the cost is much higher. At a time when the market economy of southwest Alaska continues to founder, hunting and fishing activities become increasingly difficult to afford (Alaska Department of Labor 2010).

Both late contact and lack of commercial resources have meant that the Yup'ik region has retained many social patterns and knowledge of past practices—including direct experiences with shamans—that has been lost in other parts of Alaska. The Yup'ik language is second only to Navajo in numbers of speakers (14,000) of an Indigenous language in the United States (Krauss 1980). This continued cultural and linguistic vitality has contributed to the position of Yup'ik people as among the most traditional Native American groups.

Finally, lack of commercial resources has meant that the region is among the poorest in Alaska. Poverty and its attendant social problems, including suicide, alcoholism, and sexual abuse, continue to plague the region (Berman 2014). The process of social and economic change has accelerated since the 1970s, and efforts to understand these changes and how they are impacting the people of southwest Alaska are ongoing (Fienup-Riordan 1986, 1990a, 2000, 2010; Morrow 1990; Oswalt 1990).

A major breakthrough in understanding Yup'ik cultural history was the establishment of the Calista Elders Council (CEC) and the placement of heritage preservation efforts in local hands. A community-engaged approach has been the hallmark of CEC research since 2000. Elders and other community members are deeply concerned with maintaining their knowledge of past practices, which many feel is at the heart of their survival. CEC gatherings and resulting publications are viewed as important steps in ensuring that Yup'ik cultural perspectives are not only broadly shared but also preserved for future generations. CEC is a small organization. Mark John was CEC's original director and was largely responsible for realizing the vision of CEC as giving voice to Yup'ik knowledge holders. Alice Rearden and Marie Meade have been CEC's principal translators and language experts, along with men and women like David Chanar, Davina Carl, and Corey Joseph. I work as the team's anthropologist, helping to find funding for and provide assistance with CEC activities.

Mark, Alice, Marie, and I have worked together on a variety of CEC projects over decades. In the beginning all projects were initiated by CEC's board of elders, including nine Yup'ik-speaking men and women, representing villages throughout the region. Under the new CEC, this board has been replaced by a six-member elders committee, which continues to guide the work we do. Both the original CEC board as well as the new CEC elders committee actively support the documentation and sharing of their oral traditions, which they view as possessing continued value in today's world.

Almost from the beginning, CEC's primary information-gathering tool has been the topic-specific gathering. The CEC pioneered this format while working with elders between 2000 and 2005

FIGURE 1.2. Nelson Island place names. Ian Moore.

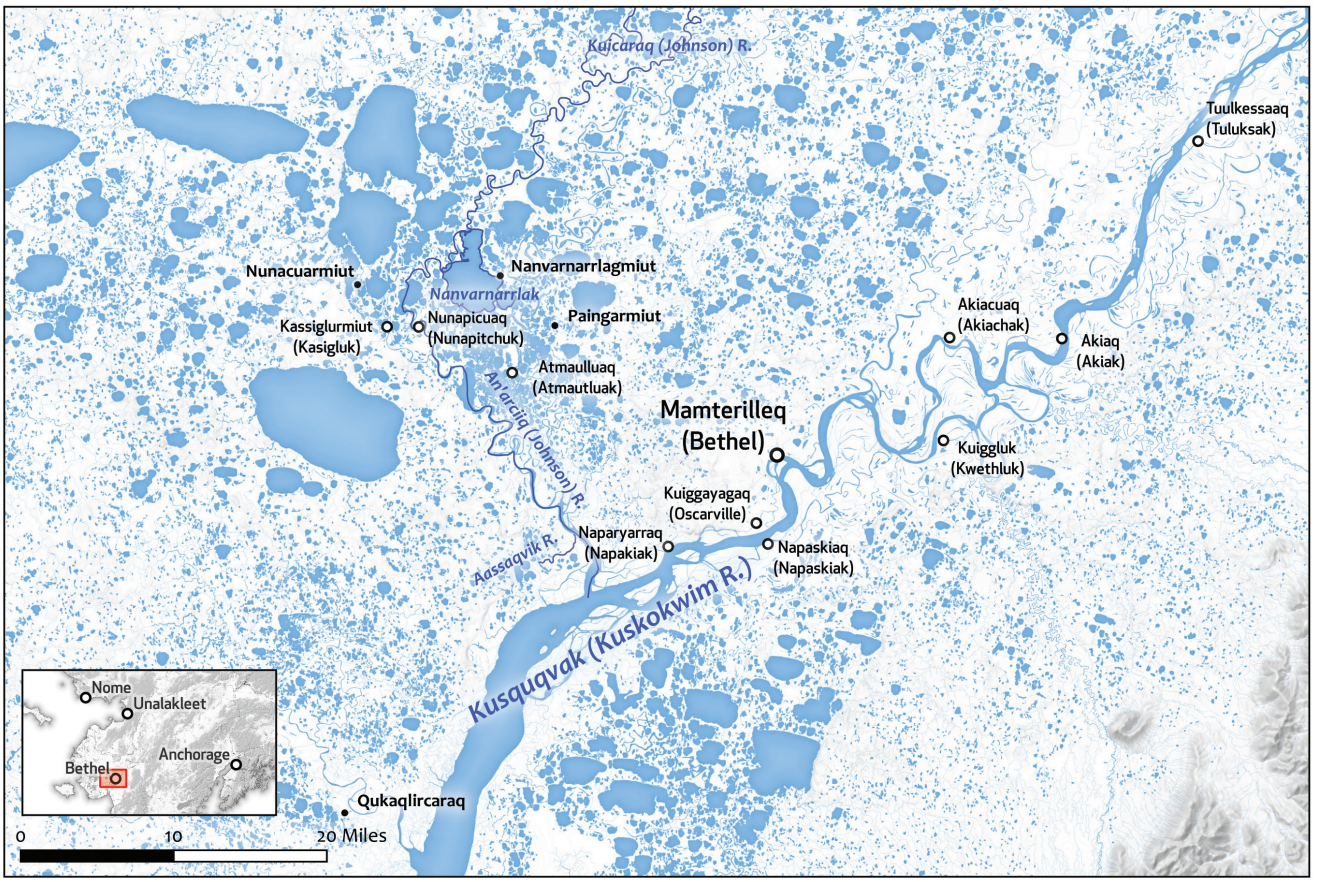

FIGURE 1.3. Kuskokwim River and Akulmiut place names. Ian Moore.

FIGURE 1.4. Canineq (lower Kuskokwim coastal area) place names. Ian Moore.

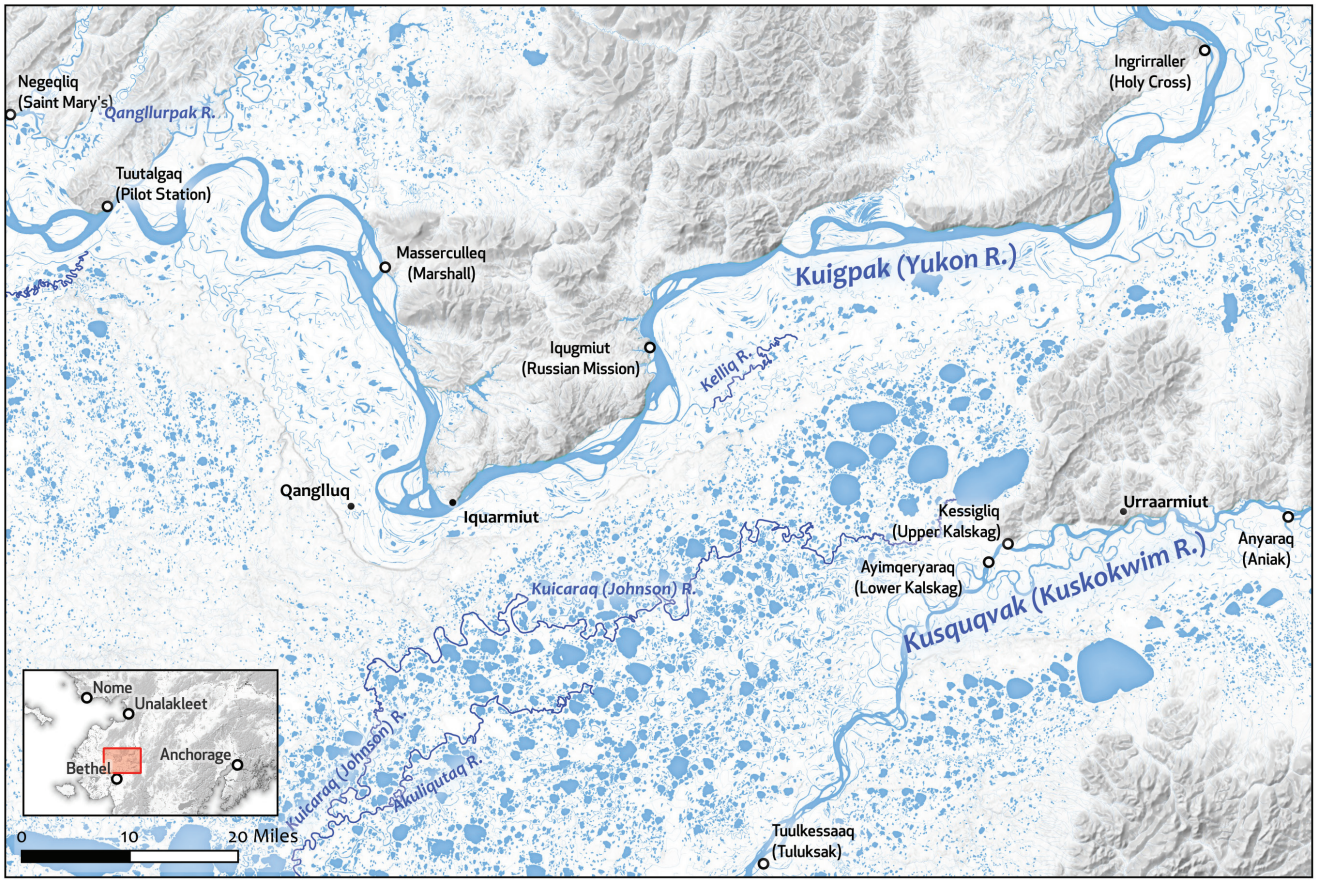

FIGURE 1.5. Middle Yukon and Middle Kuskokwim River place names. Ian Moore.

during a major Yup'ik traditional knowledge project funded by the National Science Foundation's (NSF) Arctic Social Science program. CEC staff found that meeting with small groups of elder experts, accompanied by younger community members, for two- and three-day gatherings devoted to a specific set of questions was an effective and rewarding way of addressing topics. We use the term *gatherings* to describe these open-ended exchanges between generations as opposed to the term *meetings*, which are more often viewed as goal-oriented, decision-making events. Gatherings are also unlike interviews, during which elders answer questions posed by those who often do not already hold the knowledge they seek. Gatherings (like academic symposia) encourage elders to speak among their peers at the highest level. CEC board member John Phillip (October 2006:284) of Kongiganak observed during one gathering: "Hearing the story you just told, I learned what I didn't know. It is like we are still learning."

CEC's gatherings always take place in the Yup'ik language, as the form in which information is shared is as important as the content. Alice and Marie then create detailed transcripts of each gathering, and we work together to turn these into bilingual publications and accompanying English texts (see p. 101 on "Transcription and Translation").

It is important to emphasize that these gatherings build on each other, and long and careful listening provides unique perspectives on Yup'ik knowledge. Over the past twenty years, CEC has hosted dozens of gatherings on numerous topics including: family values; traditional discipline; survival strategies; traditional technology; harvesting patterns; ocean hunting; snow and ice; and weather conditions. Our work together has resulted in more than 1,500 hours of recordings and 25,000 pages of transcripts. I'm reminded of the proverb: "If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together." These deep collaborations go beyond consultation and cooperation to the true co-conceptualization of knowledge.

In gatherings, elders teach not just facts; they teach listeners how to learn. They share not only what they know but how they know it and why they believe it is important to remember. CEC staff and Yup'ik community members value topic-specific gatherings not

FIGURE 1.6. Lower Yukon place names. Ian Moore.

merely as tools for documentation but also as contexts for cultural transmission, and youth often accompany the elders who attend. The gatherings themselves are meaningful events that enrich lives locally at the same time their documentation has the potential to increase cross-cultural understanding globally.

Some of our gatherings are held in villages, others in Bethel, and some at my home in Anchorage. During Anchorage gatherings, for example, elders arrive by air and stay as my guests—sleeping in the rooms vacated by our grown children. We all eat together in the morning, after which Mark, Alice, and Marie join us for the day. Sitting comfortably in our living room, and after an opening prayer giving thanks for our health and gratitude for being together, I turn on the tape recorder and we begin. Alice and Marie lead the discussions, with me chiming in with questions. Mark often brings seal meat or beluga to cook for lunch, and we all enjoy our shared meals. Time goes fast. By midafternoon, we stop for the day. After another shared meal, Mark may take the men home for a steam bath, while I take others shopping or to visit relatives at the Alaska Native Medical Center.[3]

CEC topic-specific gatherings and our work with elders are ultimately shaped by the concerns and choices of individual participants. When elders have been asked whether questions are appropriate in storytelling contexts, many said that stories should be "just told." Yet in our gatherings we have found elders ready and willing to answer our questions, especially when these questions show we have listened to what has gone before. It is difficult to adequately convey the compassion and loving spirit that fill their accounts. Mark John's father, Nelson Island leader Paul John, once told us that children should never be talked to harshly, as it blocks their minds and prevents them from learning: "If those who are giving them advice speak with compassion, it would be like giving them strong, healing medicine and would help bring them happiness." We remain deeply grateful for the gifts these elders have given us and their trust that we will treat these gifts responsibly and respectfully and share them in our turn.

The instrumental value of what we do is in the forefront of our work together. The image of the igloo-dwelling Eskimo still smiles out from many a gift shop window in Alaska. Though few elders directly confront this simple-minded and insidious stereotype, they sense that sharing their detailed narratives strikes its foundations, destabilizes it, and sends it crumbling down. Their contemporary narrative references to the past are active efforts to shape the future—a future in which they believe Yup'ik knowledge should be recognized and valued.

As noted, in gatherings Yup'ik elders are not just trying to *say*, but to *do* something. They know they possess a narrative tradition and knowledge system second to none, and they want others to give it the respect it deserves. In 2009, Paul John declared, "If white people see these books, they will think, 'These Yup'ik people evidently are knowledgeable and know how to take care of their own affairs through their traditional ways.' "

The Paradox of Talking on the Page

Yup'ik elders with whom we work are fluent in their Native language, and they were privileged to hear stories from their parents and grandparents as part of an oral tradition thousands of years old. In their article, "The Paradox of Talking on the Page," Tlingit scholars Nora and Richard Dauenhauer (1999) aptly compare this vibrant narrative tradition to the salmon running upriver and berries growing on the tundra—an abundance with the power to sustain us. But contemporary Yup'ik elders recognize that their younger generation is moving away from the rivers and tundra. It is for their sakes they support sharing knowledge in new ways.

Although the Yup'ik language remains strong in coastal and lower Kuskokwim communities, language loss has been severe in Yukon and middle Kuskokwim villages, where few young people are fluent speakers. Golga Effemka (January 2006:139) of Sleetmute sadly declared: "Upriver they don't comprehend in Yup'ik but only in English. It's because we elders don't teach them. When our parents raised us, they spoke to us in Yup'ik. They no longer speak [in Yup'ik] nowadays. And when speaking to them [in English], some get angry because they can't speak in Yup'ik." Although Yup'ik is second only to Navajo in numbers of speakers of an Indigenous language in the United States, its long-term survival is far from assured.

"Much of great importance is lost and added in translation," linguist A. L. Becker (2000:90) reminds us. The truth of his words captures both the strengths and weaknesses of the bilingual books that CEC has worked to produce over the past two decades.

Each translated text is at once less than the original telling—devoid of the shapes and sounds of the narrator's voice—and more. Through the double process of translation from Yup'ik to English and from oral to written form, something is inevitably lost. At the same time, readers gain access to a unique and compelling perspective on the world around them, as well as their place within it.

CEC staff and the elders we work with are enthusiastic about the books we do together. They are quick to point out, however, the importance of acknowledging the men and women who have contributed to our work, as well as of ensuring that their communities and youth benefit fully from their contributions. Although sharing knowledge is highly valued, responsibilities attend the process. Stories are not objects to be collected, classified, paginated, and sold for personal profit, and writing them down does not confer ownership. Elders also remind us that words are inherently powerful, having the capacity to create that which they describe. Words have never been used lightly within Yup'ik oral tradition, and CEC staff takes seriously the challenge of how best to translate and share these oral traditions in written form.

In documenting Yup'ik knowledge we work hard to ensure that the direct voice of individual elders always comes through. The anthropologist has a role to play, not as expert author but as translator, editor, and good listener. One technique we have developed as a way of sharing Yup'ik knowledge is to often do two books: one English for the general public and a bilingual companion volume in which quoted statements from individual elders are contextualized and shared at length. To date CEC has produced four sets of "paired" books—one English for general and scholarly audiences and the other bilingual for community use—setting new standards for academic publications resulting from collaborative projects.[4] Even in our English-language books, the decision to place Yup'ik voices front and center is the way we keep all of our books close to their sources.

Book-Making: How This Book Came Together

Having outlined how and why we work together generally, I want to share what this particular book includes and how it is organized. The book begins with a list of contributors as well as a list of specific shamans mentioned in the text. What follows is divided into two parts. As in our volumes on bow-and-arrow warfare and *ircenrraat* (other-than-human persons) (Fienup-Riordan and Rearden 2016; Rearden et al. 2021), Part 1: Sharing Shaman Stories provides an English introduction to the bilingual text, placing Yup'ik oral traditions in the context of shamanism in Alaska as well as in other parts of the Arctic. This English introduction is followed by first-person accounts in both Yup'ik and English, most recorded during elder gatherings that took place between 2000 and 2007. Part 2: Shaman Stories begins with elders' discussion of the importance of shamans and shamanism in general, good and bad shamans, and shamanism and Christianity. The narratives that follow are divided by regional group, including stories from Nelson Island, the Canineq (lower Kuskokwim coastal) area, and the Kuskokwim and Yukon Rivers. Over the years we have found that this format is the most accessible and meaningful to Yup'ik readers, who particularly value stories told by close friends and relatives from their own communities.

Narrators from different communities mix themes throughout their first-person accounts. While such "mixing" is not a problem for many Yup'ik readers, non-Native readers and some younger Yup'ik men and women unfamiliar with regional history may find this confusing. For this reason, the background and discussion of discrete topics in the English introduction is especially important. Following discussions of shamans as healers, separate chapters bring together information shared about shaman journeys, the shamans' role in masked dances requesting future abundance, powerful female shamans, shamans and *ircenrraat*, shamans and the dead, malicious shamans, shaman confrontations, becoming a shaman, and those who have shaman abilities today. These chapters promote interregional dialog, aiding readers in understanding shamanism more generally in southwest Alaska. The rich detail of individual accounts is the heart and soul of this book: As always, the English introduction is intended to help in their appreciation and enjoyment.