01/01/2022

Notes on the revision of an essay on life and death for the Inuit People in the Arctic;

To Prof. Germano:

I agree with your feedback. I have become an expository rather than an argumentative person, and usually I explain things in a way that conveys my excitement more than the point. This is undoubtedly the source of the fuzzy direction and an overly conversational tone in the paper.

Pruning is the first obvious solution to this, but it is often not so obvious whether a particular paragraph is or is not ultimately useful to the reader in understanding the final point by illustrating some new aspect. In other words, it is difficult to determine whether the information contained is something that I should be telling the reader or something they should be figuring out themselves (something I have also found trouble with when tutoring computer science). I removed the section on infanticide and canicide, trivial footnotes, and filler transitions that existed for the sake of transition. I left much of the other information intact, figuring that much of the ostensibly-cursory information is ripe for context and interpretation; however, I believe that a finer pruning (i.e., further pruning with little content loss) can be performed with much more effort.

There was no reordering – one of the things that I believe was very well done in the first draft was the logical buildup of context. I felt no improvement due to any reorderings I attempted.

There was a thorough rewording due to general style issues. Many passive wording, past tense, overly conversational tone, misspellings and grammatical issues, etc. were cleaned up. This is especially true in the exposition and conclusion of the essay. I guess this cleanup should be a given of any revision.

These changes so far help remove clutter but don’t actively promote an argument. I had better refined my argument between the previous draft and the time of my presentation. The conclusion to the previous draft was more or less along the lines of “now, you’ve seen what was and what is now. Consider it all and become more compassionate.” I’ve taken it to the slightly-less-abstract, based on your comment about the cheapening of death and the functional view of belief systems that I emphasized during the in-class presentation: what does it mean to redefine death? It’s still very open-ended but much more focused.

Lastly, apologies for the tardiness. I’ve been stressing over general indecision and confusion about my Master’s, so this has been a somewhat lower priority until I could get my head straighter.

Happy new year! (Fingers crossed that we don’t start this semester online!)
Jonathan Lam

Jonathan Lam
Prof. Germano
HUM324 – Polar Imagination
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Shifts in the suicidal imagination of Arctic native peoples

We began our studies of the polar regions with Frankenstein's creature, leading Victor Frankenstein in a malicious game of cat-and-mouse to the Arctic. Victor's desperation and emaciation are increased by the wear and tear of the climate, and he perishes. His purpose defeated, the monster too ends his life in a spectacular and almost ritualistic manner (by pyre) at the North Pole.

While *Frankenstein* is a work of fiction, with polar elements added apparently for dramatic effect, death is a pervasive theme in the Arctic and Antarctic regions. The cruel Arctic environment is uninhabitable for the majority of civilization, leaving an untouched wilderness whose image early explorers have romanticized. The poles are elusive, and, naturally, major national and colonial powers may wish to stake their claim in it for national pride and economic trade routes, expending much effort (and accruing many casualties) during the golden age of polar exploration in the mid-nineteenth century. It can be argued that the closeness of death (by natural, extreme means) gives the polar regions its allure – to cosmopolitan and tropically-situated outsiders, at least.

The same line of reasoning would not make sense for the scarce native population of the Arctic. This broadly includes people who live above the Arctic circle, who for millennia lived without support of resources from the temperate regions. Examples of people of this region include northern Canada, Alaska, Greenland (collectively, the *Inuit* peoples), and Siberia (the *Yupik* peoples). The tantalizing closeness of death and beauty of the blank landscape for those in temperate regions with fanciful imaginations becomes the weariness of daily life, in a similar way to the drone of a daily corporate life. Yet even with millennia of adaptation, being "well-suited" for the Arctic up until the industrialized era was a treacherous lifestyle of accidents and natural disasters. Even after the colonization of the northern regions by industrial powers, including modern housing and healthcare facilities, the death rate is still alarmingly high – much of which has to do with factors outside of the environment.

This essay will focus on the ways in which the Inuit and Yupik peoples conceptualize death, deal with the elevated risk of death in an oppressive climate, and how colonialism has shifted these traditional views[1]. It will be a synthesis of a number of anthropological studies conducted in the mid-to-late twentieth-century on the topics of traditions of death and patterns of death among the Inuit. The interest in this apparently morbid topic stems from the idea of a resignation-to-death by Inuit elders – a stoic suicide – as recorded in Kpomassie's encounters in Greenland; a stoic image that has captured the imagination of many regarding the nature of the native people. This is only one of a number of "death rituals" that appears to be common across the native peoples of the North (but not common in

1 A word of caution: The Kpomassie story, and the many subsequent stories and interpretations from second-hand accounts in anthropological studies, have gained the author's interest in this anthropological aspect. However, the author is inexperienced in this sort of examination, and is prone to errors such as overgeneralizing results that may be particular to a specific Arctic native people to all Arctic native peoples – this fallacy is known and noted in much of the research in this subject matter (Andersen and Poppel, 2002). Similarly, a topic with as much social and psychological implication as suicide is breached by the author for the first time. The individual effects of a suicide on a person may be grossly understated for the purposes of this paper, which focuses more on the communal effect.

frequency, and ever becoming more rare, and thus somewhat cloaked in mystery) that piqued my interest in the subject. The imagery of Frankenstein's monster's resolution to suicide picks up a shade of reality.

AN OUTSIDER'S PERCEPTION OF THE INUIT, AND SENICIDE[2]

We can learn a lot about the nature (and allure) of mortality in the Arctic through the adventure of a single man in *An African in Greenland*, as Tété-Michel Kpomassie tells the story of his lone journey to discover what he imagines to be an incredibly benevolent[3] people, the Inuit of Greenland. His curiosity stems from a library book, and his drive stems from an aversity to the strict customs of his tribe in Togo. From the pictures in the book he sees "these men plump and smiling. Strange clothes made of animal skins covered their bodies, and all you could see under their big hoods fringed with thick animal fur were their happy, open, honest faces" (Kpomassie, p. 46). They are happy, and the children are free-willed, despite living in a desolate land without trees and by eating raw meat. This is in contrast to his own circumstances, where, despite the abundance of the land and relative ease of everyday survival, he is unhappy because strict cultural rules would force him to become a priest against his wishes. The question that he seeks to answer is, *How can people live with so little and be so happy?* or, conversely, *Why does our life of abundance feel so miserably constrained?*

Kpomassie moves slowly upwards through Greenland, moving at a rate constrained by the climate that allows him not only to observe, but also to be changed by the people around him. By the end of his journey, the native people see him as one of them, a true Greenlander, of the same personality that he had sought in the first place. He quickly discovers the carefree, good-natured personality of the southern Greenlanders at K'akortoq – so carefree that the lack of apparent purpose in their actions perplexes him. The seemingly senseless polygamy, the ever-refilling coffee and house visits, the unlocked doors at night, the rampant alcoholism, the unemployment and the lack of urgency cause him to wonder where the "true Eskimos" – the ones he had read about in the book – have gone. These people have that good nature and lack of strictness he was looking for, but they are fed by Danish governmental subsidies rather than hunted seals.

While at K'akortoq, Kpomassie visits the senior people's home and a group of very lively elders receives him. This is the first encounter with traditional Inuit culture – and yet he sadly notes that they are quarantined away rather than being united with their families. As if the traditional culture were being locked away in a modern, safe box – to keep them safe, or perhaps to keep the youth safe from them.

Kpomassie then tells of the foreign idea of suicide among the elderly, speculating that these elderly are contained in the senior home to prevent them from committing suicide. We get a typical ancient version of the story:

> "In the old days, both in Greenland and among the other Eskimos, the old people, so as not to encumber a migration, would elect to remain behind and die slowly in the abandoned igloos. It

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2 The killing of elderly. Alternatively, senilicide.

3 I attempt to summarize the general fascination of the Inuit people in a single word. Kpomassie doesn't use the word "benevolent"; other attempts at summarizing this feeling may be "gentle" or "good-natured."

> was a spontaneous, stoic, unforced decision, and one which to them seemed noble" (Kpomassie, p. 101).

as well as a typical modern version of the story:

> "Today, the old sometimes commit suicide. An old man may be driven to such an extremity when he is *gamapok*, angry. Angry with himself. He goes out and never comes back. This happens particularly in winter: he leaves the house and walks a long way out on the frozen sea without heed for the places where the ice is soft, then all of a sudden – just as he had hoped – he sinks and is swallowed up. Sometimes he tells his family, and they do nothing to stop him. The old man has made up his mind and will not budge! Those who kill themselves in this way have often been great hunters. Diminished by old age and feeling themselves a burden to everyone, they don't take easily to their changed condition" (Kpomassie, p. 101).

While Kpomassie seems to have little reaction to such a story, only mentioning it in passing as a possible reason as to why the elders were in the senior home rather than living with their family, this captures my imagination as a tragedy.

In the case of the former: in a life-and-death scenario, the young are more valuable than the old for the simple logic of procreation and physical strength. But the elderly are an accumulation of knowledge, providing long-term stability and wisdom – losing them may be just as valuable. Moreover, it creates a certainty of slow death, which requires immense determination on behalf of both the abandoners and the abandoned; once the choice is made, there is no turning back, and only a death by starvation or cold awaits. It brings about a very raw emotion: sacrifice for the greater good as the ultimate means of survival[4]. This act is heroic, and this scene of Inuit senicide has captured the public imagination.

However, the latter case seems to be a case of heroics rather than heroism, with pride is at stake rather than survival. In his stubbornness, does the old man view himself as in the former case, his death serving to prolong the preservation of the living? Even if not the case, both stories have the aspect of a *violent death*[5] against oneself, and especially a violent death by the harshness of winter.

As Kpomassie continues north from K'akortoq, the environment becomes increasingly hostile, and death ever more present. Besides the obvious modes of death by freezing or drowning (or freezing after a dip in the water), our narrator experiences second-hand: drunk parents falling on and suffocating their baby, babies devoured by dogs, puppies devoured by dogs, a middle-aged man devoured by dogs, an execution of dogs suspected of manslaughter (dogs feature quite prominently in this matter of death), able-bodied men falling through thin ice and drowning, a carelessly drunk murder due to a relationship dispute, an accidental gunshot through the leg in a canoe, as well as many near-death scenarios.

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4 Another powerful instance of this story, one necessitated by relatively modern times, is that of the cleanup effort following the Fukushima nuclear reactor meltdown incident in Japan: a crew of retired, elderly Japanese citizens volunteered themselves for the cleanup effort to save the younger generation, facing a danger that we know no protection against.

5 The term "violent death" is used loosely; the National Violent Death Reporting System (NVDRS) defines violent death to be "a death that results from the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or a group or community" (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention). I use it here to mean the complement of non-violent deaths, i.e., a death not by disease or old age, including accidental deaths and deaths by harsh environmental conditions, and especially referring to deaths by intent. "Violent death" is used in a similar way in the literature, such as (Pika 1993).

Kpomassie appears to show little empathy for these deaths; this increased indifference to seeing the dead is a reasonable, or at least understandable, reaction to the increased rates of death. In her discussion of suicide rates among the Inuit, Stevenson notes that “the truth of the yearly suicide rates makes their death inevitable. Inuit are tentatively imagined at the walking dead, and yet even that thought is proscribed: It is a ‘horrible thought’” (Stevenson et al. 2012) – replace the “yearly suicide rates” with the “general observed mortality rate”[6] to match Kpomassie’s diverse observances of death. Luckily for Kpomassie, the stories he hears appear to largely be secondhand, which increases his distance from the dead; for seeing firsthand these deaths may either more rapidly increase one’s tolerance to the atrocities of death, or may cause a traumatic aversion to it.

Although Kpomassie has a background that is very different from a metropolitan reader such as myself, he does have the perspective of an outsider. The inferences that are made from these observations, without a deep understanding of the culture, undeniably have deeper roots. Keeping this in mind, we may attempt to draw some conclusions. Firstly, there must be a hardiness or indifference or other form of emotional protection in the Inuit people in order to persist among high rates of mortality. Thus, we may be overly reductive and partially answer the titular question by claiming that the significance of death to the Inuit is simply “less.” We can also be overly reductive and say that the great perceived benevolence[7] of the Inuit is precisely this fortitude: the ability to stay positive in the face of great natural danger. While these statements may be partially true, they are only in the vacuous sense: inasmuch as they are oversimplified and ambiguous.

In summary, Kpomassie’s accounts include a wide variety of methods of death and touch upon many of the major themes explored in the literature about mortality of the native people of the Arctic, including (but not limited to): senicide, alcoholism, romance and family, and death of dogs.

MULTIPLE INTERPRETATIONS OF (LIFE AFTER) DEATH

To improve our understanding of the meaning of death for the Inuit people, it is instructive to take a deeper dive into the traditions and beliefs surrounding death.

Many similarities can be drawn between the beliefs of different Inuit peoples. Walsh and O’Neill summarize the beliefs of a number of North American Inuit groups (Walsh and O’Neil 2018). Generally, the physical ritual is to cover the body and abandon it outside[8], and there is a brief period of mourning. A common trait is the breaking (“killing”) of some of the person’s possessions, so that they can take those items with them to the next life (Mackenzie Delta Inuit, Copper Inuit, Netsilik Inuit, and Caribou Inuit). Walsh and O’Neil describe the crude burial and the short mourning process mainly to be the result of two factors: a matter of pragmatism, and the fact that all of the Inuit groups believed in some kind of life after death. The exact nature of the realm of the dead varies – the Baffinland Inuit, Iglulik Inuit, believe in a series of underworlds and an “overworld” (the Baffinland Inuit called this *Qudlivun*, a realm in the sky)[9]. The Iglulik believe that certain classes of death may route to different

6 This is not an unfair substitution to make, as we will soon see. The general mortality rate of the Inuit people, as well as the rate of suicide, are both high. The latter is perhaps the more shocking, however.

7 See Footnote 3.

8 A practical consideration, as as burial is difficult in frozen ground.

9 One should be careful not to inject the connotations with Christian beliefs of Heaven and Hell with these terms. Logistically, the Inuit people probably had little to no interaction with Christian beliefs, so it would be incorrect to tie

destinations – death by childbirth, violent death, or suicide would admit entrance to the sky realm. The Netsilik Inuit believe in the existence of three realms: a joyful sky realm for those with a violent death and for hunters, *Agneriartarfik*; a joyful underworld, *Aglermiut*; and another underworld, not as joyful.

Alongside the belief of an afterlife underground or in the sky, many Inuit also believe in the idea of a recycling of souls, a reincarnation – we will focus on this interpretation. The moment one dies, they awaken as a newborn, either in this world or a mirror one. The exact reconciliation of these two beliefs is somewhat unclear; Walsh and O'Neil summarize the phenomenon of the soul as "one form traveling to the underworld and another potentially being recycled back into the world of the living" (Walsh and O'Neil 2018), implying some uncertainty on their part as well. The fact remains that, with afterworld or reincarnation, death is not an ending.

The other resounding theme is the apprehension of the dead causing harm to the living. This may involve some superstitions such as not leaving items with the body that can cause harm (Caribou Inuit), or orienting the body facing east (Netsilik Inuit). The harm being done to the living is not taken to be a form of bitterness or ill-will; it is taken to be the "perceived opposition between anything associated with the dead and the health and the living" (Walsh and O'Neil 2018), as if the dead and the living were naturally averse to one another as an axiom of the universe.

Willerslev corroborates many of these traditions as he studies the Chukchi people of Siberia[10]. He illustrates the beliefs with an analogy:

> "The Chukchi cosmos can perhaps best be described as a hall-of-mirrors world: Each thing is paired with almost endless doubles of itself, which extend in all directions and continually reflect and echo one another. For example, the much feared evil spirits, the *ke'let* … are said to live in camps and villages, travel about the country on sledges, and go hunting for prey as do human beings. The game they hunt, however, is the souls of men, which they call their 'little seals' or 'reindeer.' From the viewpoint of a human being, the ke'let have monstrous and terrifying features, such as hanging eyes, half-formed bodies, and large mouths full of teeth. Yet, from the viewpoint of the ke'let themselves, they are the ones who are human, and they regard the human shamans who can attack and kill them as ke'let – that is, as evil spirits" (Willerslev, 2009).

The "hall-of-mirrors world" metaphor is introduced with the example of the ke'let evil spirits but also is true of the dead. For the Chukchi, there is a combination of the afterworld and reincarnation in a sort of "mirror realm" – when one dies, they are immediately reborn into a realm both alike and reversed from ours. The inhabitants of that mirror realm have their souls and bodies flipped inside out, and they see our realm of living as a mirror realm of the dead, one that they will reincarnate to when they die. It is unclear whether these inhabitants of the mirror realm are exactly the ke'let or if they are a different form, but they share the aspect that the dead are the "other" in the perspective of the living, and vice versa. There is a symbiosis: what we see to be reindeer or seals may be their people, and the living

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them to the same origin. Also, the cyclical nature of Inuit souls differs from the Christian belief, in which Heaven and Hell are eternal resting places.

10 Walsh and O'Neil also note the relation of their work to Willerslev's notions about Siberian peoples. Conversely, Willerslev is one of the editors of the book in which Walsh and O'Neil's paper is published. Willerslev's observation of the Chukchi's cultural thoughts on death stem from the same purpose as mine: to understand better what deeper meaning there might be to voluntary death.

must hunt to survive; and, like people, the dead game are instantly reborn in the other world. This is the "perceived opposition" between life and death mentioned in Walsh and O'Neil – a necessary and constant exchange between the life and the dead, not out of ill-will, but simply because it is a natural order like that of hunter and prey.

The realm of the dead (i.e., the mirror world) is believed to have power over life in the living realm, and this is true from the perspective of both realms. This is because the number of souls is conserved in this system; by controlling how many are born or die in one realm, the other realm is affected inversely. (This interpretation provides a logical (if not provable) mechanism for which sacrifice benefits the living.) Thus there is a constant deference to the other side, a sort of respectful and ritual kowtow of reciprocation. As we have seen earlier, there is also the ritual "killing" of possessions, both alive (in the form of sacrificing livestock) and non-living (by breaking such possessions), as these possessions are to accompany their owner in the next life. These sacrifices can be seen as a way to appease the other side (sacrifice "is made not only to the gods but against the gods" (Evans-Prichard 1954)), so that they don't exert their power.

Thus death carries a functional role within this worldview, by recycling old souls into new souls and keeping the system in equilibrium. If, hypothetically, the people in one realm were to live forever, then the other world would be starved and the young will cease to be born, whose result will be cataclysmic on both realms. In other words, the belief is that one is linked with an realm that struggles to survive and requires death in your world in order for it to flourish; and the inhabitants of that realm also sentient and aware of the reciprocal effect of our realm on it. Moreover, we are stuck in an inextricable and transparent contract with the mirror realm – transparent in the same way that scientists are unsure of how quantum entanglement binds two entangled particles, the state of one particle affects the other, even at great or indeterminate distances[11].

The importance of sacrifices cannot be understated. In order to maintain the balance, there must be a healthy flow from the living to the dead, and vice versa. Just as humans create tools to ease various aspects of their lives, sacrifices are a tool that humans devised to have some control over the life-death cycle, seen as a way to prevent others from dying. As Willerslev notes, livestock (usually reindeer) may be sacrificed for a human. If the living are poor on reindeer, then a surrogate may be used; typically, a *zyozyat* (reindeer sausage) or even a wooden image of the zyozyat may be ritually sacrificed using by stabbing. Of course, the greater the sacrifice, the more likely the ones in the other realm will be appeased; the surrogates may only act as something like artificial sweeteners are to sugar: symbolizing the attempt at providing sugar, but without the original benefit of providing energy. The dead can recognize this sacrifice as a request for postponement but will not allow it infinitely.

Willerslev claims there is a fundamental difference between "ordinary" suicide among the Chukchi people and the ritual suicide that is voluntary death. The latter is ritualized and usually involves advance notice, whereas the former is typically more sporadic. He then reasons that the latter cannot be primarily motivated by the a matter of efficiency, for two reasons: ritual suicide is still carried out today

11 Note that quantum entanglement can be broken the moment one of the entangled particles interacts with the environment, as suggested in a Quora thread "How can an entangled particle pair be 'disentangled'?" (Kattel 2019). One such form of interaction is measurement (as in the famous metaphor of Schrödinger's cat). We can actually use this to further our analogy with the mirror world: one may argue that the moment that one is able to truly observe the mirror world, then the entanglement would collapse, possibly throwing reality into an unstable state. The same can be applied to many religious phenomena that can only be felt but not proven (scientifically), and thus lie outside the realm of science except in its (reportedly) perceived effects.

when the Russian government will provide necessary living aids; and ethnographic records have shown that ritual suicide occurred not only for the elderly, but also for able-bodied youth (mostly those in distress). A possible justification for this logical gap lies in the mirror world: by offering oneself up as a sacrifice – the ultimate sacrifice, when compared to other sacrifices, which act only as inferior surrogates – the long-term stability of the two realms is protected.

Sacrifices for the sake of survival are not limited to the elderly, as there have been some instances of infanticide and canicide in Inuit cultures as well (although much rarer than senicide). Infanticide, like senicide, prunes off weaker members and aids the stability of the group (Schrire and Steiger 1974). However, it may not be purely a matter of efficiency; the same argument can be made as in the case of senicide, that this has the secondary benefit of returning souls to the mirror realm. Ritual canicide relates directly to this theory: while animals have been sacrificed as a means of curing the dead in other cultures, the mirror world provides a semi-concrete mechanism for this cure.

If we return to Kpomassie's stories, it is now a matter of deciding whether the second, modern story is that of a ritual or regular suicide. While it is not very ritualistic, it does not fall into the patterns of the aggravated suicide of the youth, for example in its means (walking off into the snow) and is told by Kpomassie to be a story of the elderly only, and typically of the hunters, who participate most in this life-death exchange. It would not be too far off to say that, albeit hidden by their stubbornness, these angry elderly truly believe that they are helping the young in their fatal decision.

COLONIAL HEALTHCARE AND TEENAGE SUICIDE: THE MODERN CONUNDRUM

It is no surprise that life in the Arctic regions is still treacherous, but certain aspects of life have been made more difficult after the subsumption of Arctic lands by industrialized southern nations, beginning in the second half of the twentieth century. In particular: Alaska became a U.S. colony, the Arctic regions of North America came under Canadian control, Greenland under Danish control, and Siberia under Russian control. This has some benefits for the local peoples, such as governmental aid for basic survival needs, but the negative effects arguably outweight the positive ones.

We can begin our survey into modern mortality with the modes of death that have been invariant since ancient times. The rate of accidental death (Day and Lanier 2003) and infant mortality (Aaen-Larsen et al. 2003) will likely always remain relatively high, given the harsh environment. Similarly, the psychological effects of the year-long day, which Kpomassie encounters in the form of a Greenlander becoming homicidal and amnesic, and which have caused noticeable seasonal patterns of violent death (Pika 1993), will not change as long as the Earth continues on its orbit and humans can sense light.

Some of the important objective sources of change directly related to globalization include climate change, government policies, resource development (such as oil drilling), animal rights groups (which may interfere with traditional hunting efforts), contaminants[12], increased cultural exposure with the south, imposition of religion (especially Christianity), and imposition of new education systems (Anderson and Poppel 2002). A combination of these effects has led to a health crisis among the Inuit

12 The contamination even includes the radioactive type: a U.S. military plane crashed into Greenland with hydrogen bomb nuclear warheads onboard in 1968, leading to genetic deformities in wildlife and a spike in cancer rates in the surrounding areas. (Ehrlich 2002).

people: an increase in access to unhealthy foods and changes to the environment caused a marked change in the lifestyle. Anderson and Poppel state that between 1945 and 1996, the proportion of the population engaged in hunting and fishing had decreased from 66 percent to 25 percent. This was accompanied with rising trends of crime and drug abuse, and a general feeling of hopelessness in the face of the ever-present global market economy. If we consider the changes in mortality rates of Alaska natives between 1979 and 1998, we find that the major causes of death pivot from being concentrated in the infectious diseases to primarily heart disease and cancer (Day and Lanier 2003), a result of a more unhealthy lifestyle made easier by globalization with lower intake of the local diet of fresh meat (Tynes and Haldorsen 2007). According to Day and Lanier, unintentional mortality in Alaska occurs at a rate 3.9 times that of whites in the U.S.; suicide is the fourth leading cause of death (7.5% of all deaths), 4.2 times the rate of whites in the U.S.; and homicide is at a rate 3.3 times that of whites in the U.S. Alcoholism has also become a systemic problem among the Inuit people; the mortality rate due to alcoholism in Alaska was fourteen times the national average in 1968 (Fleshman 1972), and this may be closely related to suicide and accidental death rates.

With this context, the suicide pandemic among the youth is not surprising. Adding to the list of large-scale lifestyle changes mentioned above, there are a number of more subtle effects that further isolate the youth. An article aptly titled “The weight on our shoulders is too much, and we are falling” describes several of these effects, such as: the unskeptical absorption of Western media containing unrealistic romantic expectations and an entirely different system of idealist, monogamous “voluntarist individualism” than the traditional arranged marriage system; a general racism and poverty; and segregation of the youth from elderly via the education system (Kral 2013). This has led to the widespread feeling of isolation between the youth and their family or romantic partners.

With so many social pressures, one might hope that increased access to nationalized healthcare after colonialization would mitigate the suicide crisis. However, the system is not effective nor understanding. There are long separations from family (both in space and time), and there are several stories of losing contact with elderly family members, only to discover that they had been unceremoniously died on the journey or during the treatment (Stevenson 2012). Moreover, the methods for treating suicidal patients, as conducted via a survey of healthcare workers in the Arctic, tend to be procedural rather than personal (Trout and Wexler 2020). The healthcare system appears to cause more to scramble away from it than to seek it out; and the patients that go through this system may suffer additional mental strains from cultural separation.

Stevenson examines the Canadian healthcare for the Inuit, and reaches the same conclusion as Trout and Wexler that the approach to care is not appropriate for treating the youth. She describes the perspective of legislators on suicide as “at once prohibited (*life is sacred, thou shall not kill thyself*) and awaited (*but, of course, we know you will*)” (Stevenson 2012). For the purposes of the law, death should be prohibited, and all of the standard necessary actions should be put into place to aid the suicidal people; when considering whether “whether it would be better to have a ‘dead Eskimo’ or a ‘disturbed,’ living Eskimo,” it is easy to always prefer the latter, and much more difficult to consider each case and its effect on the community. Stevenson asserts that this is the curse of stereotypical modern medicine: it is a biopolitical plan to keep as many people alive as possible, interfacing with patients using the face of anonymous care. As with much of politics, the purported benefits lie far from the perceived effects.

Needless to say, it feels as though everything is wrong. *The weight on our shoulders is too much, and we are falling*.

In their desperate isolation, the morbid trend of suicide may even feel as a unifying thread, as illustrated in the common feeling:

> “Some Inuit described seeing their dead friends visit them, usually at night, asking to join them in death … Suicide for some has become a shared response to distress, and … a way of belonging and identifying with similar others” (Kral 2013).

The motif of having the dead come to visit is not unheard of in popular culture, but it is also reciprocated in the traditional mirror world analogy: while the realms of the living and dead are usually kept separate, the inhabitants of the mirror realm may be able to enter the current world and look for souls to take when certain taboos are broken: “suicide is when the dead rope the living in” (Willerslev 2009). One may imagine that, amid high rates of suicide, the pressure from the many in the mirror realm is too much to resist.

Despite being a point of unification, this youth suicide is by no means accepted with pride. It is the opposite of the ritualized voluntary death of the elders.

> “This trend (of rising suicide rates) is deplored by the Alaska Natives I have encountered. The high rate of suicide does not imply a positive social sanction. Many of the patients expressed a feeling of shame and feared nonacceptance in their village following their shooting … [Historically, voluntary death of the elderly] was undertaken after reflection and sometimes consultation with family members, who might assist in the final act. This form of suicide was positively sanctioned and had a cohesive effect upon the community” (Kost-Grant 1983).

Indeed, it appears as though the meaning of self-death has changed from that of voluntary death. While it may be a way for the youth to escape and unify with the dead, it has a highly negative effect on the community, and sometimes this may be its primary purpose:

> “In fact, there is a general saying among the Chukchi that ‘young people kill themselves to harm their kin,’ meaning that suicide among youngsters often has the aim of hurting the feelings of others, most notably parents or lovers” (Willerslev 2009).

Why has the intent changed? One factor that may have contributed is that the ritualized death (when carried out by a family member) is outlawed as homicide (e.g., in Russia) or otherwise antithetical to a public health system (as in Stevenson’s examination), and is thus much rarer (for fear of prosecution). The youth, then, may be more influenced by negative connotations with suicide from outside sources rather than local traditions. Voluntary death having thus been outlawed, suicide moves from the ritual space to the self-initiative. This is a lens into Willerslev’s categorical separation of suicide and voluntary self-death, in particular the sporadic and non-ritualized aspect of the former. Other studies have also taken to this view, suggesting that ritualization also has the effect of regularizing the behavior, and this deregularization combined with the devastation of traditional cultures has caused “a situation of overwhelming traumatic self-annihilating behavior” (Bogoyavlensky and Volshonsky 1997).

In a sense, we can say that national health system such as the Canadian one, in their attempt to conserve and control life, has the contradictory effect of preventing controlled manners of death and forcing unsanctioned, unregulated death.

The concept of control is a recurring theme in Stevenson's work, and ties back to the belief of the mirror world. Recall that there is the belief that the realm of the dead has power over life in the realm of the living. Conversely, the land of the living has some power over the land of the dead, by virtue of the fact that the number of souls are limited. By means of sacrifices, the land of the living can expedite the process of recycling souls, and keep the mirror worlds in a healthy equilibrium. But a blanket restriction on preventable death via government policy is a wrench thrown into the equilibrium.

We consider two final examples relevant to the interpretation of death present in Stevenson's work. The first is the metaphorical death, the type that does not involve the cessation of a heartbeat. Stevenson cites the following exchange between a social worker and an Inuit family, upon returning their daughter after several years of tuberculosis treatment.

> "On arrival to the house … the social worker … knocks on the door, says to the Eskimo couple who lived there … 'Here is your daughter we brought her back for you,' to which they replied 'We don't have a daughter. We never had one.' 'Well yes you did but that was a long time ago.' And they say, 'Yes, but she died. The white man took her away and she died. We've never heard of her since'" (Pearson 1973).

There is a myth that if you touch a baby bird that falls out of its nest, then its mother will reject it. While that myth is unsubstantiated, the daughter in this story is very much dead to her parents. It is not simply a matter of racism (because the doctors are white). Stevenson explains the above example as a problem of forced cooperation (compliance) of the Inuit with an uncaring health system and how removing an individual from the traditional social system causes one to be not recognized as alive anymore. But we can also explain it in the lens of the second example, which lies in the analysis of the Inuit word for "survival." According to Stevenson,

> "The word *annaktujuniq* literally means the state of one who escapes from sickness, hunger, danger. And in another context, the base *annaktuq* is used to describe an animal or quarry that gets away, escapes death. Survival is linked to escape. The intimacy of the other's death, the death that one escaped, is crucial – the other's death is imagined as one's own" (Stevenson 2012).

If we consider the act of survival to be the act of staying alive, this description is a fitting synopsis of previous interpretations. Living, or survival, is a constantly dynamic action: the act of being chased by death. Every life is intimately linked with a corresponding death; and death (in moderation) is a cause for celebration for its part in this cycle. Artificial restrictions on death and a stagnancy of lifestyle (such as in the case of the disowned daughter above) diminish how alive one is. One of the many possible facets of suicide among the Arctic youth may be to get closer to the act of cycle of life and death; in their isolation, suicide the only known avenue.

LIFE AND DEATH IN THE ARCTIC[13]

I am as ever tempted to chalk up all of the surprising aspects of historical death phenomena, especially infanticide and senicide which can be thought of as having economic effects, to simple maxims of pragmatism, as expressed by Balikci when surveying prior work on infanticide among Inuit peoples:

> "A basic postulate, 'life is hard,' and its corollary, 'the insupportability of unproductive members of society,' govern these acts" (Balikci 1967).

The "life is hard" postulate extends past reasons of efficiency; the simple fact of higher mortality and colonial oppression is an oversimplified but all-encompassing reason for suicide. I am also tempted to treat traditional beliefs of the afterlife in the traditional way: held in disbelief until there is sufficient evidence to prove it; Taylor, for example, says that his hypothesis about the secondary nature of canicide as a means to ward off malevolent spirits in the huskies "can probably never be proven with certainty" (Taylor 1993). I continue with the same hesitancy, that of a scientist: all of our evidence is given in the form of retrospective, uncontrolled studies.

That being said, that is the view with which I entered into the study of Arctic mortality and thoughts on death, captured by the single image of an hardened Inuit grandmother pondering her final moments in the abandoned igloo as she sends off the youth for survival. Having considered the evidence, it is safe to conclude that many of the deaths are more than matters of efficiency, despite their superficial appearance. It is similarly overly simplified and *dangerous* to reduce the problems of the contemporary youth to that basic postulate, "life is hard" – the work of Trout, Wexler, and Stevenson has the potential to save these lives now and in the future by better understanding the root causes, and to disregard it by being reductive will needlessly allow anguished, socially-motivated suicide.

By studying the Inuit traditions and beliefs surrounding death, we find that death is a complex, multifaceted framework rather than a single event. Understanding this framework gives us a better facility to understand its changes over time.

First of all, it does not always correspond literally to physical death. In most cases, physical death is associated with a rebirth in another world, and thus the soul remains alive, or at most momentarily dead. On the other hand, we have also seen instances in which one who is physically alive is dead in the view of the community, and thus lost from this cycle of life.

Secondly, this fits within a larger animistic framework. The cycle of life and death is not limited to humans, but also the ecosystem of prey, pack animals, and symbolic substitutes. However, not all deaths are considered equal, and in particular human deaths are optimal for the cycling of human souls.

Thirdly, that there is an aspect of living or surviving that is escape; and, conversely, to live in a world without escape means barely living. Given to a number of factors related to the industrialization of the Arctic regions, leading to more sedentary lives and the destruction of traditional hunter ways of living, one may regard the amount of life within the Inuit communities to have decreased. This also ties in with establishing dynamic equilibrium with the mirror world.

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13 The title of this section borrows the title of the final chapter of Hester Blum's *The News at the End of the Earth*. Now we mention life as well as death, for the interpretations we've encountered have linked them together as cyclical and continuous; part of the same fabric.

These beliefs surrounding death, while not provably real in a scientific sense, are very real in their effects. That is why the topic is important for study: the risks, decisions, and emotions people generate are deeply tied to their beliefs. If the belief system under consideration is that of life and death, then we expect (and observe) the effects to be equally grave. For the sake of this essay, we focus on one particular interpretation of death – the “mirror realm” of the Chukchi peoples, as described by Willerslev – and take note of its effects. Picking another interpretation will lead to a different analysis.

Changes in beliefs also lead to changes in effects. The meaning of suicide and death has degenerated unpleasantly among the youth in Arctic regions in modern times. Rather than the voluntary death achieved by their elders that was unifying and respected, the youth suicide epidemic is a denial to colonial control and its maladies. Suicide has become disgraced and often spiteful against family and loved ones or against oppressive social situations, which has the opposite effect it used to cause. Voluntary death by a family member is illegal, the elders are too distant, and the healthcare system only has a superficial meaning of care. The concept of death has been cheapened – reduced to worldly urges and a dull survival without consideration of the mirror world.

With this understanding, we return to our role as outsiders.

We return to that initial fascination with the Inuit tradition of voluntary death that allures Kpomassie, myself, and many others, as well as that general “benevolence.” In the photos of the Inuit people smiling when they had so little food, because they did not fear death, because they knew that their soul does not end even if their life perishes? That if the life was scarce in this world, that it would be bountiful in the mirror world?

We return as outsiders in globalized healthcare and climate change. Stevenson proposes that “if we let suicide remain a wound rather than a problem to be solved through cooperation, we can experience the suicidal imaginations, its desires and negations, rather than circumscribe it with meaning” (Stevenson 2012). No simplistic, procedural methods aimed at the effects will improve the root cause of confused belief systems. In the same that the tackling the polar imagination has led us to gain valuable insight into why and how we chase the delusions about Arctic and Antarctic regions (and inconsiderately destroy it with climate change), we must now tackle the suicidal imagination.

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