

AKULIVIK, QUEBEC

POSSESSION

by Paul Tough

No one can say for sure why M was behaving so strangely on that long, cold night last February. One theory is that she was in despair, afflicted with a broken heart, upset over a brief and passionate relationship that had just ended, and ended badly. In this version of the story, M, a twenty-nine-year-old single mother, was filled with regret and guilt – the relationship was with a man who was pledged to another, a forbidden love – and she descended into a psychological crisis. To southern minds, this is the version that makes sense: love can make you crazy, emotional distress can manifest itself in strange and dramatic ways. But to most people in Akulivik, that was not the way M's condition appeared. In Akulivik,

the accepted wisdom was that M was possessed by evil spirits.

To those who later treated M, the signs of possession were clear. She was crawling on the ground, swearing and yelling and saying all sorts of dirty things to her mother. Her voice was deeper than usual, as if something else was trying to speak through her. Also, according to local authorities on spirits, possessed people sometimes identify themselves as an animal – they'll say, "I'm a polar bear," or "I'm a caribou" – and at one point that night, M's mother, distraught and exasperated, asked her daughter, "Who are you?" M replied, "I'm a spider."

When M's mother heard that, she called up Henry Quissa, a respected member of the community and the local church, and described her daughter's behaviour. Henry drove over to the house. He walked in the door and saw M on her hands and knees and knew something had to be done. He and M's mother took M to the church, a barn-like structure, painted green, in the centre of town. There, Henry and a few other members of the congregation interrogated M for hours. At dawn, they concluded that she was, indeed, possessed, and that there was only one thing that would cure her: exorcism.

Henry Quissa and the other men who took part in the procedure that followed are part of a new religious movement in Akulivik. Until recently, religious faith in Nunavik, as northern Quebec is known, has been a matter of geography: Inuit on the Ungava coast, in the east, are more often Catholic; on the Hudson coast, where Akulivik is located, they are all Anglican. This divide is essentially an accident of history. At the turn of the century, when contact between whites and Inuit was still in its early stages, mostly centred on the fur trade, dozens of missionaries went to northern Quebec to bring the gospel to the Eskimos. Catholics went east, Anglicans went west. On both coasts, the missionaries, especially the Anglicans, met with tremendous success, and in a matter of a few years they had converted nearly everyone. The shamanistic, animistic religion practised by the Inuit seemed to vanish almost overnight. In most communities in Nunavik, there's now at least one minister, usually an Anglican and usually Inuit.

Beginning in the 1970s, a new generation of Christian missionaries came up from the south, from Manitoba and Ontario and Quebec. They came from many different churches, and from different denominations, but the style and nature of their faith was always the same: based in Pentecostalism, led by charismatics, centred on a belief in spirits and miracles. The missionaries held Bible studies and revival meetings in churches and hockey

arenas and community centres throughout the north, and the response among the Inuit to this great awakening, though not quite as universal as the response a century earlier to Anglicanism, was powerful and widespread. Dozens of people in each community were born again, and revivals still take place from James Bay to Baffin Island.

Estimates are that 10 to 20 percent of the Inuit in each village now consider themselves born-again. In some communities, like Povungnituk, ninety kilometres down the Hudson coast, congregations have broken away from the local Anglican churches and formed new ones, often called Full Gospel or Harvest Field churches. But in Akulivik, because there are just 400 people, there's only one church, and the two faiths worship together. Like so many things – electricity, telephones, cable television – the revival came late to Akulivik. Most of the faithful converted in just the last two or three years. The change in their lives, they say, has been revolutionary: many describe an existence cursed by alcohol and adultery transformed utterly, in a single moment.

The men who decided to perform the exorcism on M were all born-again. None of them had performed an exorcism before, but they had heard of them happening in other villages up and down the coast, and Henry Quissa had actually attended one, though almost twenty years before. They decided to take M to the town's social-services centre, a few hundred yards from the church. "Centre" is perhaps an overstatement: it's a brown shack

at one end of town tacked onto the nursing station, just a couple of rooms where Inuit counsellors give out pamphlets on suicide prevention and gas sniffing and spousal abuse. It was there that the exorcism began.

What went on in social services over the next few days is a matter of considerable dispute. There was shouting, there was praying, there was laying on of hands, there were lengthy "discussions" with the demon that was possessing M and spoke with her voice. There was also, it seems clear, a significant amount of physical restraint. The exorcists tied M down with what one of them later called a "soft cloth." They sometimes held her bodily. Afterwards, they claimed that all this was necessary because she was trying to hurt herself, but in their descriptions of the exorcism, it's also clear that M was trying to get away, and saying she wanted the exorcism to stop. Those demands were disregarded by the men in the centre because, to them, it wasn't M talking, it was the demon that was possessing her.

According to one participant, M – or the demon – used magical tricks, creating animal sounds that seemed to be coming >



from different parts of the room. "We knew that we were not alone," he said. Sometimes, though, her behaviour was less mysterious: she repeatedly asked, one man said, about the man with whom she had had the forbidden affair.

Word of the exorcism spread through the town – or at least through most of the town. Every Inuk soon heard what was taking place in the social-services centre, and throughout the five days that M was there many townspeople stopped by, wanting to help, or pray, or at least see what was happening. But not a single white person in Akulivik knew. White teachers in the school say they noticed their students behaving strangely, acting up, clearly upset about something, but they couldn't figure out what was going on, and no one offered any explanations.

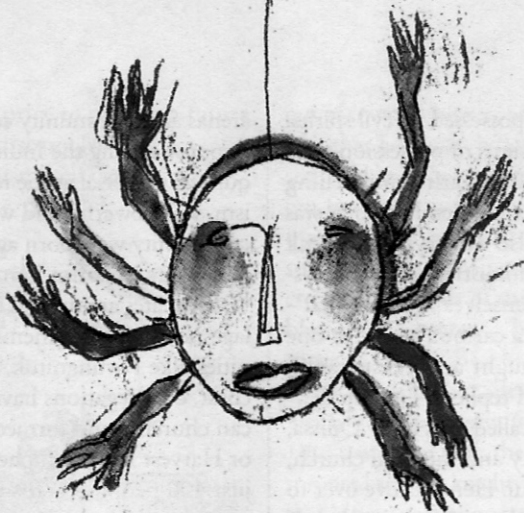
Apart from the school, there are four main public buildings in Akulivik: the municipal office, the nursing station, the police station, and the church. Two – the police station and the nursing station – are run by whites; in the other two – the municipal office and the church – it's rare to see a non-Inuit face. The whites in Akulivik – the teachers, the nurses, the cops – all live on the edge of town, and in Akulivik, the edge of town is literally the edge: the only windows in the nursing station look out on hundreds and hundreds of miles of rock and ice. It's easy to feel disconnected. One teacher said that she figured that the whites in Akulivik generally were aware of "about 1 percent" of what was happening in town.

On the fifth day of the exorcism, things got out of control. M, while flailing her arms around, cut her hand on some vertical blinds. The men in charge tried to stop the bleeding, but couldn't. They decided to take M next door, to the nursing station, to get her hand stitched up so they could continue with the exorcism.

The nurse on duty was Marion Morkill, an Anglo Montrealer with long experience in the north. According to Akulivik residents and regional health officials familiar with Marion's subsequent report, the story that she heard from M was quite different from the one the exorcists would later tell. M apparently told Marion that she'd been held against her will, beaten, and psychologically battered.

Marion was in the nursing station with M for a few hours. She locked the door and got on the phone to the police, and to her supervisors at the hospital in Povungnituk, who in turn contacted the regional health authority, which is based in Kuujuaq, on the Ungava coast, several hundred miles away.

That evening, M's father called Marion and asked her to release M into his care. Marion at first resisted this idea, but she had no authority to hold her, and M ended up that night at Henry Quissa's house, where the exorcism continued. The next



morning, four officers from the regional police force showed up and took M away. They put her on a flight to Povungnituk and took her to the hospital there. She was treated and then sent on to a psychiatric hospital in Montreal, where she spent most of the next few months.

When I visited Akulivik in May, people were trying to put the whole incident behind them, though there was still a fair amount of bitterness.

Eli Anijuk, one of the participants

in the exorcism, said he had gone to visit the nursing station when Marion returned from a two-month leave, and had told her that he had forgiven her for sending M away. There was no way Marion could have understood what was really happening, he said, since she didn't believe in demons. But he told me that he still thought that the community deserved an apology from the authorities – from the police, from the health authority, and from the nurses. In the nursing station, Marion and the two other white staff members said that they couldn't talk about what had happened, but they did say that they are still hoping for their "day in court," where they can offer their own explanation of what they call The Event.

On my way to Akulivik, I stopped in Kuujuaq and Povungnituk. In each village I spoke to the local minister – in Kuujuaq with the Anglican minister, in Povungnituk with the Harvest Field minister – and they both said that they had performed dozens of exorcisms over their careers. According to Benjamin Arreak, the Inuit Anglican minister from Kuujuaq, what happened in Akulivik was not a Christian exorcism at all. It was what he called a "cultural exorcism."

Calling attention to that distinction is generally considered taboo in the north. It seems self-evident to an outsider that certain Pentecostal beliefs and practices, like exorcism, have enjoyed the popularity they have among the Inuit partly because of their direct parallels in pre-Christian Inuit spiritual practices; spirit possession, for instance, is an idea with a long history in the north. And to Benjamin Arreak, the exorcism that was attempted in Akulivik sounds like one based in traditional shamanistic practices, which always involved a lot of talking. "That might help someone with a heavy burden, or with anxiety," said Arreak, "but it is not a Christian exorcism." A Christian exorcism, Arreak explained, rarely lasts longer than five minutes, and is preceded by a lengthy and painstaking period of preparation, including fasting and prayer on the part of the minister and his aides. To the men in Akulivik, the suggestion that their ceremony was "traditional" is offensive – they are not shamans, they explained, they are Christians: Jesus himself cast out demons, and that was the only tradition they were following when they conducted the exorcism on M.

There's a psychologist in Montreal, Dr. Laurence Kirmayer, >

who has made a study of Inuit mental-health ideas, especially as they intersect with religion. He believes that most of what is considered possession in the north is actually mental illness.

Dr. Kirmayer connects the Akulivik exorcism with some larger political facts in the north. In one recent paper, he wrote, "In the contemporary sociopolitical context, spirit possession and interaction can serve to contest conventional responses to social suffering by explaining action in ways that reflect Inuit cultural knowledge and that, therefore, support local authority over illness and healing." In other words, exorcism becomes a political act of self-determination, a way of declaring that the solutions of the white world are not equal to the problems of the Inuit, that only an Inuit solution can cure this person's ills.

The idea of self-determination in Nunavik is still pretty new. Before the 1970s, there was very little local political control, but now most decisions are made by a regional government, almost entirely run by Inuit. The transition that is going on in Nunavik is a big one, and a confusing one, both for an outside observer like me and for the Inuit who are caught up in it themselves. It involves changes in medicine, politics, and hunting and fishing, as well as religion.

When I first arrived in Nunavik, I assumed that the Pentecostal revival, like the first wave of Christian missionaries, was a southern idea come north, another chapter in the colonial history of northern Quebec. And then the first Sunday I was in Kuujuaq, I went to an evening church service. Sitting in the bare pews, surrounded by Inuit in parkas singing Christian hymns in Inuktitut, I wondered why I had thought Christianity was more native to Toronto than to Nunavik. It is, I recalled, a religion born among fishermen, in small villages in a barren landscape. To some Inuit, the Pentecostal movement is a way to claim a faith as their own, an attempt to create order in the midst of an often baffling swirl of cultural influences, a way to re-exert a distinct spirituality. The movement seems to be coming under Inuit control more quickly and thoroughly than the Anglican church ever has. Many of the born-again in Akulivik spoke approvingly of a new Pentecostal church in Iqaluit whose name is loosely translated as the "Rock Foundation Church." They say it was conceived and is run entirely by Inuit, and sends Inuit missionaries throughout the north.

There is still a wide variety of interpretations of what happened in the Akulivik social-services centre in February: it was a solemn religious rite; it was an assault by Christian zealots; it was an act of Inuit political expression. But among the Inuit in Akulivik, there seems to be agreement on one matter: even some who didn't approve of the exorcism say that it was a mistake for M to have been taken away from Akulivik and sent to Montreal. It was an Akulivik problem, they say, and a solution should have been found within Akulivik. And in fact, even after the apparent mistreatment that she suffered in February, M refused to co-operate with an investigation of the incident by the Quebec Provincial Police, or to press charges against the men who had held her.

In June, she returned home to Akulivik.