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Ethnographic Cylinder Recordings of Whaling Captain George Comer

Part Two

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Comer includes several cylinders in his collection which document Inuit rituals. A name exchange ritual (1124) is announced by Comer as a "... ceremony gone through by the Iwilik natives when two have the same name. One gives up his name to the other." Other cylinders which Comer has recorded are documents of shamanistic ceremonies. (1114(B); 1135; 1138) These ceremonies, or anticoots, as Comer called them, were important parts of Inuit belief in magic. According to Ross:

Eskimo shamans—sometimes called *angakoks* (variously spelled), medicine men, conjurors, or witch doctors—held mystical meetings from time to time, during which they communicated with the spirit world in order to appease spirits for broken taboos or to obtain help in times of illness, hardship, lack of success in hunting, and so on. . . . Comer respected the native beliefs and ceremonies; the anticoots were sometimes intended to convey benefits to the whalers as well as to the Eskimos²⁴

The cylinder recordings of these ceremonies contain a variety of sounds, ranging from shouts, moans, and whispers to high-pitched gurgling noises. In his 1903-1905 journal, Comer gives the following account of one of the recording sessions:

Monday, January 11, 1904

. . . Had the graphophone going this evening and took two records of the natives' songs. I wished the old natives to go through the form of anticooting but the old ones could not look upon the idea with favor as it might offend their guardian spirits, but said it would be alright for some young chap to go ahead, which was done.²⁵



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Captain George Comer

Comer also photographed several shamanistic ceremonies. One of these depicts a communication between the shaman and the soul of a dead person through an intermediary third person, a *keleyak*, whose head is wrapped in a leather thong. This thong is attached to a stick which is held by the shaman. Franz Boas gives the following descriptions of this particular curing ritual:

One of the most curious methods of divination applied by the *angakut* is that of "head-lifting." A thong is placed around the head of a person who lies down next to the patient. He is called the *keleyak*. The thong is attached to the end of a stick which is held in hand by the *angakok*, called in this case the *keleyew*. Then the later summons the soul of a dead person. As soon as it appears, the head of the *keleyak* becomes so heavy that it cannot be lifted.

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Now he asks, "Is the soul of so and so present?" If he mentions the correct name, the head cannot be lifted. Then he continues to ask questions as to the nature and outcome of the disease, which are supposed to be answered by the soul of the dead person, which makes it impossible for the head to be lifted if the answer is affirmative, while the head is raised easily if the answer is negative. As soon as the soul of the departed leaves, the head can be moved without difficulty.²⁶

In several instances, Comer himself took an active part in shamanistic ceremonies of the Eskimo. In some cases, he used the power of the shaman to predict the outcome of his own whaling expeditions. Boas includes the following account of Comer's experiences:

I will insert here a few descriptions of incantations given by Captain Comer, because it is not quite clear what part of the performance is a general feature of these ceremonies, and what may be individual peculiarities of certain angakut or of particular incantations.

'On the evening of the 7th of April some of my natives told me that if I wanted to know where our hunters were, I could find out through a Kinipetu (Kenepetu) who is considered quite a great angakok. I was directed to give him about a pound of meat from the rear part of a caribou's ham. This, it was said, he would give to his guardian spirit. I gave him the meat, and told him that I wanted to know where my natives were, who had been musk-ox hunting for some time, and were expected back.²⁷

I was told when he was ready, and went out. He had come to the snow hut of one of my Aivilik (Iwilik) natives. The men sat along the edges of the beds, the children farther back next to the wall. The young and middle-aged women had their heads covered, while those of the girls and old women were uncovered. The angakok had a strap around his waist, to which were attached a number of strips of caribou-skin belonging to his guardian spirit, which will be placed later in the season under some stone, whence the spirit is supposed to take them. He went outside; and while he was gone, two hatchets which lay on the floor were put away out of sight.

In a few minutes he came in. It seemed that his guardian spirit could not be interested. The angakok said something to one of the women. She made some reply, and pretended to throw something away, with the remark, "Begone, begone!" probably addressed to some evil spirit. Then all the natives said the same. Then the angakok went out again, and then all commenced shouting, "Go on, go on!"

The guardian spirit of this angakok has a head like a walrus. When the angakok came in, it was found that his guardian spirit, instead of having gone to see my natives, had visited my home; and the angakok described how my house was a near a large stream, and that there was an island in sight; and he said that I was not to go on that island for a long time after I got home; if I went, I should be taken sick, and might even die. I told him that there was a large stream near where I lived (the Connecticut River), and that there was an island in sight (Long



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Beached whale photographed by Captain Comer.

Island). This seemed to please him and also the other natives, for they felt as though he had given proof of being a great *angakok*.²⁸

It becomes apparent, as the researcher examines the journals of Captain Comer, his photographs, and his sound recordings, that he was a vigorous and enthusiastic ethnographer as well as a daring participant in Eskimo culture. He knew many of the natives by name, and recorded those names in his journals and in the notes on his cylinder boxes.²⁹ He was particularly close to one of the Eskimo women, *Niviatsianaq*, who was named "Shoofly" by the whalers after a popular song of the time.³⁰ Shoofly sang for one of Comer's recordings (1486) and she was often photographed, usually wearing the elaborately beaded parkas which were prized among Eskimo women. He helped to care for natives who were ill or who had experienced a tragedy.³¹ In one of his journal entries, he mentions playing his graphophone for two natives who had brought their trade to the *Era* [March 14, 1904]. On several occasions, he pulled out teeth of ailing crew members and natives alike.

In all endeavours, Comer showed respect for the natives. If the local people felt that his ethnographic interests conflicted with their own beliefs, they let him know. His response, as with the anticooting ceremony previously mentioned, was to honor the native culture. Thus he was able to share and communicate with the local population in a way which resulted in much benefit for Comer—as a whaling captain and as an ethnographer—and for the Eskimo.

In her recent article, "Bringing the Captain Back to the Bay," Dorothy Eber describes Inuit recollections of Comer, years after his arctic visits. According to Eber, Captain Comer was referred to as a shaman or *angakok* by residents of the west coast of Hudson Bay.³² One of the local men recalled Comer in this way:

. . . I remember Captain Comer. We used to call him *Angakok* because he was able to take photographs. They would appear just like that, out of a piece of paper.³³

Another recollection comes from *Kanyuk Bruce*, whose husband, *Mikitok Bruce*, is the son of *Tom Luce*, an Inuit boy who was adopted by Shoofly:

Angakok was a very likeable man . . . He got his name because of the photographs and because he had those little technical things that would wind up. People here never used to have those mechanical things.³⁴

No doubt one of those "mechanical things" was the Edison phonograph. Thus, *George Comer* the ethnographer is remembered for the mysterious ways in which he documented the mysterious ways of the Inuit of Hudson Bay. In the early part of the 1900s this compassionate whaling captain brought much excitement into the lives of the native people; he returned to Connecticut with artifacts of an aural, visual, and material nature that will continue to be of significant ethnographic value to archivists, anthropologists, folklorists, and ethnomusicologists throughout the world.



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The whaling schooner *Era* under sail.

FOOTNOTES

²⁴ Ross, ed., p. 69 N6.

²⁵ Ross, ed., p. 88.

²⁶ Franz Boas, (1901), p. 135.

²⁷ Comer's journal does contain an entry from April 10, 1904 in which musk-ox are mentioned:

"A sled arrived from the Chesterfield Inlet with some musk-ox skins for the steamer," (p. 109).

²⁸ Boas, (1901), pp. 156-7.

²⁹ The informant name correlations within these two documents may be found in "Names of Native Informants," in the Archives' documentation file for 54-115-F.

³⁰ See Ross, ed., p. 151 N5.

"Shoofly was named by whalers after a song popular at the time. Descendants give her native name as *Niviatsianaq* . . . an Aivilik woman of thirty-five years, one of the two wives of Ben (*Arb-lick*), aged about fifty. . . . Ben had worked as whaler and hunter for Comer for a decade or so and was friendly enough to allow Shoofly to live with Comer on board the *Era* when the ship was in Hudson Bay, but the relationship was frowned upon by some of the government personnel. Borden [Lorris E., the doctor of the *Neptune*] saw it as a 'very bad influence on the members of the crew' (Lorris Elijah Borden, 'Memoirs of a Pioneer Doctor,' p. 66)."

The *Neptune*, the largest ship of the Newfoundland sealing fleet, arrived in September of 1903 to anchor near the *Era* for the winter. The crews of the two ships were not friendly, though Comer and the commander of the Canadian steamer, *Albert Low*, were cordial to each other [Journal, December 21, 1903].

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". . . A child (Equark) died today, one of our natives. Sickness was probably brought on by the mother eating too freely of the large seal taken a few days ago. We made a coffin for it, which pleased the natives very much. It was then carried inland by three of the women. It was a sister of a little boy who we call Tom Luce, named after our owner. This Tom Luce eats with me at the table sitting on my knee and receives much notice from all."
- ³² Dorothy H. Eber, "Bringing the Captain Back to the Bay," *Natural History*, p. 67.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, p. 67. The speaker is Joe Curley of Eskimo Point, ". . . born in the late 1800's."
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 70.
- ³⁵ Ross, ed., p. 176 N4; see also Roald Amundsen, *The North West Passage* (London: Archibald Constable, 1908), pp. 264-7.
- ³⁶ Ross, ed., p. 176 N4.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 188.
- ³⁸ The date for cylinder 1109, January 24, 1901, seems to be in error. It might possibly have been 1904. There is no evidence that Comer made any cylinder recordings in Hudson Bay prior to 1903.
- ³⁹ Ross, ed., p. 22.
- ⁴⁰ Ross, ed., Comer Journal entry, p. 82.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 169.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 68 (October 17, 1903).
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

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A photograph by Captain Comer of a shamanistic ceremony.

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