

**The Orphan Boy and the Wind God:
An Inuit Legend of the Vision Quest**
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Folklorists define legends as tales that (i) are believed true by their culture of origin, (ii) have human protagonists, and (iii) are set in times and places that are purported to be historical (Bascom, 1965). Von Sydow (1948, pp. 60-88) proposed that *Sage*, “legend,” be subdivided into two categories that he termed memorates and fabulates. Memorates were accounts of personal religious experiences, and fabulates were what memorates became when they were retold by individuals who disbelieved in the tales. For example, in modern Western culture, the sighting of a ghost may be believed true by its first narrator(s), but treated skeptically by others. Honko (1962, 1964) suggested that the term “memorate” be reserved for tales that are narrated in the first person, and he introduced the term “belief-legend” (*Glaubenssaga*) to refer to the same tales when they continue to be believed true even though they are narrated in the third person. So defined, belief-legends are a subset of legends that meet three additional criteria: (iv) they are narrated in the third person, (v) their antagonists are numina, and (vi) their narratives portray human encounters with numina.

For students of religious experiences, belief-legends are irreplaceable sources of data. Belief-legends function in living tradition as exemplars of religious experiences of their types. The tales furnish paradigms for the interpretations of religious experiences. People who have religious experiences will draw on their familiarity with belief-legends in order to comprehend their experiences. Belief-legends also contribute traditional themes and motifs to the contents of peoples’ religious experiences; the contributions proceed unconsciously when they do not additionally proceed consciously. Again, belief-legends frequently have pedagogical use as classic illustrations of religious experiences. The experiences that they portray are often deliberately emulated.

Belief-legends may be compared with the mixed oral and literary traditions of Western mysticism. Consider the place of Ezekiel 1-3 in the history of Jewish mysticism, the legend of Muhammad’s night journey in the history of Sufism, New Testament spirituality in Protestant Pentacostalism, the Book of Revelation in the history of Christian apocalypticism, and so forth. Even when a tale is fixed in writing, its oral presentation in preaching regularly adapts and modernizes it. In some cases, for example, Muhammad’s legend, a renovated variant may itself displace earlier written versions. In oral tradition, no variants are fixed in literature, and constraints on revision may be few or non-existent.

In the course of their transmission, belief-legends tend to undergo schematizing simplification through the omission of biographically accurate but idiosyncratic details that are irrelevant to the tales’ functions as paradigms of their types of religious experience. The tales may also be expanded through the introduction of new materials. The additional motifs are frequently of mythic rather than legendary character.

The following examples of Inuit folklore will illustrate the process of a belief-legend’s alteration through the introduction of mythic motifs.

C. E. Gillham recorded a legend from Hooper Bay on the Bering Sea in Alaska, that he entitled “The Boy Who Had Faith in Himself, or, How Attu Became a Great Hunter.” To judge from its tone, the narrative was addressed to children. It tells of an orphan boy who quested for visions and so became a great hunter.

Many, many years ago an Eskimo orphan boy, named Attu, lived at Hooper Bay. Usually orphan boys have a brother, a grandmother or some distant relative but Attu had none. When he was only eight years old he worked for the other people so that he might live and have something to eat. In the winter he carried snow for them to use in cooking and making tea. In the summer he car-

ried the water from the lake to the igloos. The women fed him for his work. He wished to be a great hunter, and thought about this constantly.

So much did Attu think of being a great hunter that he slept very little. Often at night he would lie awake and hope that he could be a hunter and have all the seals and fish he could possibly use. He stayed in the Kashim, or Man House, because he had no home. He would listen to the tales of hunting told by the older men. In olden days before there were Schools and Missions the old men often told stories in the Kashim to teach the boys how to hunt and how to live when they grew up. The Medicine Men, too, were teachers. They told of deeds of hunting and fishing so the boys might learn how to do such things when they grew older.

When little Attu was nine he had a new job in the village. He cleaned out the igloos and carried out the garbage for the women. But all the while he was thinking of being a great hunter. At nights he would make his plans, and fashion spears and bow and arrows in preparation for the day when he would be large enough to hunt. He often asked the Great Spirit to help him to be the greatest hunter in the village. By thinking about it at night when other people were asleep he gained great strength. So he began to be known as the boy who had faith in himself.

At ten years of age Attu had a new job in the village. This was very hard work. He had to shovel out the porches of the igloos and keep the snow out of them. At Hooper Bay this was a very strenuous job because the snow got very deep in the wintertime. All the porches of the igloos would often be blown full of snow at night. Attu worked hard and kept thinking of the time when he would be a great hunter. He seldom slept at night and his eyes became red because of lack of sleep. He would lie awake all night and ask the Great Spirit to make him strong. So he came to believe in himself more than ever.

Often during the winter nights little Attu would walk over to Spring Village and spend the night there in the Kashim by himself. He would sit where he could look out of the top of the big igloo and watch the sea, thinking all the while about being a great hunter.

Years ago all the Hooper Bay Eskimos would move to Spring Village in the springtime. Here they would be much closer to the ocean and could hunt seals much easier. As springtime drew closer Attu would spend all his nights alone in the Kashim of the Spring Village. Never sleeping, he would keep watch toward the sea and ask the Great Spirit for help.

Just in front of the Spring Village was a little lake. One night as Attu watched he beheld about a dozen little elves dancing and playing leapfrog along the shore. They did not try to speak to Attu although they say him watching. As daylight came they disappeared into the ground and the orphan boy returned to the main village. He knew that to see the little elves was a very good sign and was sure he was getting stronger. This spring he felt certain that he would become a hunter.

The Eskimo people were preparing to move to the Spring Village. They packed their mouse food into grass baskets and tied them with strips of seal-skin just as little girls tie their hair in bow knots. Also they packed baskets with berries so they could make Eskimo ice cream. Some baskets were filled with greens that they had found in the bottoms of the lakes. All these baskets were taken over to the Spring Village, for the Eskimos were going to move there in a few days.

That night little Attu again went to the Kashim at the Spring Village. He felt himself becoming stronger all the while as he watched from the window in the

top of the big igloo. He did not sleep a wink. As he looked out into the empty village he saw the baskets filled with mouse food, berries and greens. Suddenly the bow knots on top of the baskets began to move. Soon all the baskets were dancing just as the elves had danced the night before. At daylight the baskets became still again and Attu returned to the main village.

The third night that Attu went to the Spring Village he again watched from the top window in the Kashim out toward the sea. On a hill near the village was a graveyard. As he watched, the graves began to dance. The logs that were piled on top of the graves stood up like legs. They danced until daylight, and then suddenly stopped.

Attu was not afraid, for orphan boys often see things which other people do not. He knew some very powerful medicine was coming into him. He felt strong. He asked the Great Spirit to help him more and make him a great hunter. Returning to the main village, he learned that next day all the people would move to the Spring Village.

As darkness came the fourth night Attu went to the Spring Village. From the top of the big Kashim he watched out toward the sea. All night he watched, but he saw nothing. At daylight he went outside. Looking toward the sea again he saw a boy of his own size coming toward him.

In his hands the boy carried great pieces of blubber. Walking straight up to Attu he seemed about to give them to him. Instead he walked around behind him. Looking toward the sea again Attu beheld another boy coming. He was carrying great pieces of blubber, too. The boy was larger than the first one and older. As he drew near he, too, seemed about to give the orphan the blubber. But instead he walked around behind him.

Then came another still larger boy carrying great pieces of blubber. Behind him came a young man carrying still more. Behind these came men who were still older and finally the last man came. He was old and bent and his hair was grey. He, too, carried much blubber and like those before him, he acted as though he was going to give it to little Attu. Instead he passed around behind him.

Attu waited but no more people came. Then he looked behind him. No one was there. Suddenly Attu realized what he had seen. He had been looking at his own life. The first boy was his present self. Those who followed were himself as he grew older. He knew then that he would live to be very old, and would always be a great hunter.

Returning to the main village, the orphan boy packed his harpoons and his bow and arrows. Taking his kayak he went out to the sea to hunt. The other people moved out to the Spring Village.

As soon as Attu went to hunt he saw a large mukluk. This large seal is the finest the Eskimos can find in the Bering Sea. There are smaller seals and spotted seals, but the mukluk is the finest. The orphan boy threw his harpoon and killed the mukluk. He went to the Spring Village with it where all the people were moving into their springtime igloos. When they saw the boy with the big mukluk they were very excited.

“Look,” said the old Medicine Man, “the orphan boy is now a great hunter. He was worked so hard and believed in himself so faithfully that now he is great.”

Then Attu cut up his big mukluk and gave it all away. In Eskimo land all people give away the first seal they kill. So he divided the fine blubber with all the people. As he gave it away he stood out in front of his igloo singing a song:

“Come and get your blubber now,

It is for you all,
For the old and for the young,
For the large or small.”

As Attu sang the people came, bringing dishes to carry away the fine blubber. The orphan boy was happy. He knew he was to become a great hunter.

The next day Attu returned to the sea in his tiny kayak. Again he killed a big mukluk. This time he did not give it all away. Instead he had some fine blubber for himself, and the big mukluk skin. The skins of these big seals are the same as money to the Eskimos. It is quite a job to dress them. First the orphan boy stretched the big animal's hide upon the ground, fastening it with wooden pegs. It looked like a giant fur rug. Then he scraped all of the hair off the skin and left it there to dry. It was like the end of a great drum. After the mukluk skin was dry as paper Attu rolled it up and put it away.

The orphan boy hunted each day and killed many mukluku. Then he dressed the skins, scraping off the hair. When the hunting season was over he had killed so many seals that he was very rich. The pile of hair from the seals was as big as the Kashim. Everyone marveled at the great hunter he had become.

When the fishing season came Attu took nets of braided whale sinews and set them in Hooper Bay. He would often come in with his kayak filled with salmon. He would unload it and return for another load. Seldom did he sleep when he was fishing.

So the orphan boy lived and grew old. He was the greatest hunter the village ever had. Often the old men in the Kashim would point to him and say to the boys:

“You must believe in yourself to be great even as Attu believed in himself. You must listen to the advice of the old people, work hard, and call upon the Great Spirit to make you strong.”

At Hooper Bay even today the people often speak of the orphan boy who never slept, but studied how to become a great hunter. Often when there is no blubber in the igloos the women will tell the men:

“If you would be more like Attu and not sleep so much may be you could catch plenty of mukluku, too.”

It is very good for boys and girls, too, if they think hard about what they wish to do. If they work hard and ask the Great Spirit to help them they will be great. (Gillham, 1955, pp. 104-111)

Attu's realization that “he had been looking at his own life” implies that it was in a vision that he beheld the series of boys and men. The several references to night vigils, prayers, and “thinking” indicate that the vision was deliberately induced--and imply how to go about seeking such a vision oneself.

In other cases, belief-legends report the manifest contents of religious experiences without mentioning their occurrence during alternate psychic states. People do not always know when they have experienced an alternate psychic state, and even people who do know do not always mention the fact. Consider, for example, the following tale from the Copper Inuit, which again concerns an orphan boy's acquisition of hunting prowess through the Great Spirit.

Living on the Arctic coast among a group of Inuit people were an old woman and her grandson, Kautaluk. As the parents of the young boy were both dead, there was no one to hunt for them. Sometimes kind people would give them food, but more often than not they had to make do with other people's leftovers.

Although some people respected Kautaluk and his grandmother, there were others who tried to make their lives miserable. With no one strong enough to protect him, Kautaluk often found himself being teased and tormented. On occasions when he would visit the igloos of these people, they would catch him by the nose and lift him off his feet. At times like these Kautaluk endured terrible pain. When he was very hungry the same people would offer him only scraps of food.

One night after Kautaluk returned home suffering from this cruel treatment, he received a visitor. All was peaceful and still in the settlement when the Great Spirit that watches over the earth came to Kautaluk and gave him the gift of great strength. Kautaluk told no one of what had happened. Instead, he proceeded to try out his newly acquired powers. While everyone was sleeping he went outside and began to pick up the most enormous boulders he could find. One by one he threw them toward the igloos where his tormentors slept. Later Kautaluk found a huge tree that had been washed ashore by the ocean waves. This he carried to the door of the igloo of one of his worst persecutors.

The following morning when the people came out of their homes they were amazed to see the rocks and the tree trunk.

“How could this have happened?” they wondered. “No human being could possibly have done this to us.” Kautaluk said nothing.

Sometime thereafter, Kautaluk was visited once again. This time the Great Spirit told him, “A white bear and her two cubs will arrive soon. Their skins will make a warm sleeping bag for the two of you.” At that time Kautaluk and his grandmother had nothing with which to cover themselves in their icy igloo. Only the warmth of his grandmother’s body had kept Kautaluk from freezing while he slept.

It was not long after that one of the hunters spotted a mother bear and her two cubs. All of the men immediately ran out onto the ice. Kautaluk watched the hunters as they ran past him. Then he took his grandmother’s boots, laced them up and set out in the direction of the bears. Running quickly, Kautaluk soon caught up with and then passed all of the other hunters. He wanted to get to the bears first.

The men were astonished to recognize Kautaluk passing them by. With one voice they declared, “Oh, that is only Kautaluk. Surely he will be attacked and bitten. That poor orphan, running about in his grandmother’s boots! He will be killed!”

Kautaluk paid no attention. He ran directly toward the bears and grasping them by the hind legs, he repeatedly beat them on the ice like a woman knocking snow out of clothing. The three bears were quickly killed. This done, Kautaluk picked up the bears and effortlessly carried them back to his grandmother’s igloo. The hunters meekly followed him.

Arriving at the igloo Kautaluk turned back to the men and said, “There is food here for us all, but first you must skin the bears. My grandmother and I shall make fine sleeping bags from their hides.” The hunters set to work without comment.

When the skinning was completed, Kautaluk gave each man some meat for his family. The wives could now begin the cooking in their large pots over the open fires.

As was his custom Kautaluk went around the settlement visiting each igloo in turn. In every one there was plenty of meat to eat. Unlike previous visits everyone invited him to eat with them. Only the choicest, most delicious parts of the bear were offered to him. Kautaluk refused this generosity saying, “I

have never eaten these succulent pieces before. Just give me a part of the tough end. I only wish to eat those parts to which I am accustomed.”

Having won the admiration of the people, it was not long before Kautaluk wanted to have his own home. He wished to take a wife. He chose for his wife the daughter of his greatest tormentor! He wanted the girl, but he did not wish to have anything to do with her father. He decided that one last time he would demonstrate his strength for all to see. In this way he could be certain that people would never treat him unfairly again.

When everyone was asleep Kautaluk quietly walked about the settlement. Finding another large tree that had been thrown up on the shore, he carried it to the igloo which belonged to the girl's father. Carefully, he balanced the tree against the igloo in such a way that unless he himself removed it, the slightest movement from the people within would cause the tree to crash through the walls crushing everyone inside. Throughout the night Kautaluk proceeded to do the same thing to the igloos of all those who had mistreated him.

The following day fear and panic spread throughout the settlement. The people made ready to leave this place for their lives were obviously in danger.

Kautaluk then revealed his tremendous strength by removing the trees from the igloos of his former enemies. All of the people were awe-struck and his persecutors feared for their lives. Preparations were made to leave.

However, to those who had been kind to him, Kautaluk called out, “You do not have to go. You helped me when I was weak. Stay here and my grandmother and my wife and I will stay here with you.” And so they did. (Metayer, 1972, pp. 35-39)

In this tale, we are told that the protagonist “received a visitor” who was “the Great Spirit.” There is no indication that the deity was encountered in the manifest content of a vision, nor that the vision occurred as a consequence of a vision quest.

The Mackenzie Inuit to the west of the Copper Inuit and the Iglulik, Baffin Island, and Labrador Inuit to the east tell the same belief-legend of the Moon Man, rather than the Great Spirit. For technical purposes, the alternative motifs may be termed “allomotifs.” Alan Dundes (1987, pp. 167-177) suggested that the equivalence of allomotifs' functions within a narrative also implies their symbolic equivalence in a psychoanalytic sense. The symbols share a function because they have the same unconscious meaning.

At the manifest level, the allomotifs have related but different meanings. When the belief-legend was told of the Great Spirit, reference was made to his power to transform a weak, puny, undernourished boy into a tall, strong adolescent. The Great Spirit was presumably the Inuit god known in precontact times as Sila, the Indweller in the Wind, who was credited with a vivifying power (Merkur, 1991, pp. 41-71). The Moon Man had no comparable power to make a boy grow strong. When the belief-legend was told of the Moon Man, a deity of the hunt (Merkur, 1991, 155-59), the boy acquired not strength, but good fortune in hunting.

Apakaq, whom Rasmussen met on the Noatak River in northern Alaska, told him the following tale, which Rasmussen titled “The Spirit of the Air Helps a Poor Boy.” In this version, the orphan's encounter with Sila is mythic, rather than legendary in character. Instead of an invisible, supernatural power, the wind god appears in the form that shamans behold in seances and relate in myths. When Inuit shamans of the western Canadian Arctic wished to end a blizzard, they might picture the wind god as a giant infant whose flapping clothing generates the winds (Merkur, 1991, pp. 64-66; 1992, pp. 152-53). This variant of the belief-legend also departs from the canons of realism in the extent of the revenge that the orphan eventually takes against the people who had abused him.

By the coast of the great ocean there was a settlement with many inhabitants. Here lived a poor man and his wife. Often the natives of the place traveled over to the Chukchis, who owned tame reindeer, to exchange fine reindeer skin for lines of sealskin, but the poor couple could never go along, for they had nothing to trade with.

Then it happened that the woman bore a son, a miserable boy whose legs were so misshapen that his heels were in front of his toes. They called him Quarsaitko (Fright), and nobody believed that he would ever amount to anything.

One time the boy's father decided to accompany his neighbors to the land of the Chukchis; but he had nothing to trade with, and the chief scorned him for his poverty, saying:

"Strange man that comes such a long distance without having anything to trade with, I will make you an offer; you shall have a gift if you can swallow the knee cap of a reindeer. Then I will give you a calfskin, and that you may well call a good exchange."

The poor man knew well that it was impossible for him to swallow the knee cap of a reindeer, but he dared not refuse to try. So he tried it but became sick and vomited and returned home ashamed, scorned by all the strangers, who amused themselves over their chief's joke. As soon as the poor man came home, he seized his boy and told him what he had endured, and beat him thoroughly, crying:

"And I have to tell that to one who will never at any time be able to avenge me, to a wretched, misshapen boy."

The father did not do this from malice, but because he wanted to arouse the boy's mind. And after that it became a custom with him; often he laid hold of the boy and ill-treated him, saying the same words to him:

"And this I do to you, who will never at any time be able to avenge me."

Thus he reared his son to hatred and mistrust of others, and the boy was never happy, but felt hostile to all mankind.

One moonlight night when the boy was outside playing, he suddenly heard a sound in the air. The sound came nearer and nearer, and now a little boy became visible, a little boy who came floating down toward the ground with a big napkin of reindeer skin fluttering round him. It was the spirit of the air. First he hovered round and round the houses, then came to rest and began to talk, speaking thus:

"I come because I have pity for you. You suffer evil every day because they have scorned your poor father; but if you will make a blood offering to me, I will help you. While other men sleep, you must run around and practise all kinds of sports, and I shall make you strong and swift."

Thus spoke the babe who was no other than the spirit of the air, and then he vanished.

The misshapen boy was called Fright. From now on he never slept at night, for when others did not see him, he exercised his strength; and his feet took on their right shape. Soon he became a young man, big and strong as a giant; but nobody knew what great strength he had, for he always kept to himself.

The spirit of the air had given him a staff that was to be his only weapon against his enemies; and this staff he was to use the first time that sledges arrived from the settlement of the wicked chief of the Chukchis.

At last one day the sledges came, and now everyone believed that Fright was out of his mind, for he ran alone towards all the strange men, swinging his stick over his head, and shouted so that everyone could hear it:

“And so it was I who would never avenge my father whom you forced to swallow a knee cap!”

First the folk laughed at him, but it wasn't long before the whole settlement was seized with terror, for one by one he put to death all the Chukchis. And for every man that fell, he shouted his battle cry of vengeance. At last there was no more. Thus Fright fulfilled his father's expectations, and for every man he had slain he sacrificed blood to the spirit of the air.

This was Fright's first battle. Afterward he became a much feared man-slayer in all lands, and put to death all the men he came near. And every time he slew men he sacrificed blood to the spirit of the air, crying:

“And so it was I that would never avenge my father!”

Fright lived always far from men, and his abode was the top of a mountain with a view to all sides; for all lands had now joined forces to put him to death. One day, as he lay in a mountain cavern, stones came rolling down, one after another, and Fright sprang up and ran up on the mountain to see who it was that threw them. He saw a man and cried to him:

“Why do you do that?”

“Because I want to try to put Fright to death.”

“I am Fright, and no other!”

“What! Then come home with me!~” Fright did so, and he killed this man also and all his family, in the same way that he had slain all the others.

But that was his last act of manslaughter, for suddenly he heard a voice up in the air, crying, “He-!”

It was the spirit of the air that came fluttering down in circles; it was quite bloody about its mouth with all the blood offerings, and it cried:

“Stop! ! I can't drink any more blood. If you slay more men I must eat you.”

With this word the spirit of the air soared upward and vanished.

Fright turned back to his dwelling and slew no more men. He married the daughter of the chief, and afterwards hunted caribou with the staff he had used to slay men. And he became a mighty hunter and a big man among his neighbors. (Rasmussen, 1932, pp. 157-161)

Dundes' claim that allomotifs are both functionally and symbolically equivalent facilitates the interpretation of the belief-legends. Not only was much the same belief-legend told of the wind god and the moon god; but it was told of the wind god in three different ways. In one version, a boy envisions himself at a variety of different ages and the prophecy is attributed to the Great Spirit. In another version, a boy encounters the Great Spirit, and no description is given of the god. For lack of a description, the god remains an invisible, supernatural power, active in the physical world. A third variant describes the god as a giant infant, as was consistent with his picturing in myth and during shamanic seances.

When Dundes' theory of the unconscious equivalence of allomotifs is applied to these tales, the wind and moon gods are equivalent not only with each other, but also with the boy's visions of himself at a variety of different ages. Freud (1910, p. 123) asserted that “a personal God is, psychologically, nothing other than an exalted father,” but Weiss (1932) revised Freud's theory to accommodate the structural model of the psyche. Weiss explained that gods symbolize paternal representations that have been internalized in the superego. Although psychoanalytic writers have a tendency to regard gods as symbols of the superego function of conscience, the Inuit allomotifs instead indicate the positive superego function of ego-ideals.

Suddenly Attu realized what he had seen. He had been looking at his own life. The first boy was his present self. Those who followed were himself as he grew older. He knew then that he would live to be very old, and would always be a great hunter.

Like the ideal images of the boy's self, the wind and moon gods may be understood psychoanalytically as manifest representations of the ego-ideal. Like the self-images, the deities are metaphoric representations of an ideal situation. The being that the vision-quester would like to be, the being that has the powers that the vision-quester seeks to acquire, is represented in the tales as bestowing powers to the visionary as a gift.

I would like to suggest that the belief-legend offers an Inuit psychological theory. The transfer of power from a deity to the visionary is an Inuit way of talking about the ego-ideal's communication of inspiration and self-esteem to the ego or self. Although the theory is expressed in the traditional, projective terms of Inuit religion, it is very much the same theory that we express in Freudian jargon. What differs are not the psychological ideas, but the metaphysical systems in which the ideas are embedded. We assume that our nervous systems produce both conscious and unconscious thought; the Inuit attributed inspiration to an extra-somatic source, the divine.

Freud noted the symbolization of psychology by mythology early in his psychoanalytic career. He wrote:

A large part of the mythological view of the world, which extends a long way into the most modern religions, *is nothing but psychology projected into the external world*. The obscure recognition (the endopsychic perception, as it were) of psychical factors and relations in the unconscious is mirrored--it is difficult to express it in other terms...--in the construction of a *supernatural reality*...One could venture to explain in this way the myths of paradise and the fall of man, of God, of good and evil, of immortality, and so on, and to transform *metaphysics* into *metapsychology*. (Freud, 1901, pp. 258-9; Freud's emphasis).

Freud's translation of the Oedipus legend into the Oedipus complex remains the classic example of transforming metaphysics into metapsychology. The Inuit belief-legend of the orphan boy and the wind god provides us with entrée into the psychology of the vision quest.

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