

Seven Eskimo Religious Movements:  
Description and Analysis

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by  
Paula Lee Holland

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PAULA LEE HOLLAND

A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of  
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To Ed, Aileen, and Carolyn



ABSTRACT

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Studies of acculturation in the Arctic have not generally considered those forms of culture change, usually termed "revitalization movements", which involve the attempt by members of a culture to establish a new culture in entirety or in substantial part. A number of such attempts have been reported to have occurred among the Eskimos, but they have been neither comprehensively described, except in one case, nor adequately analyzed. Reasonably complete descriptions, based in each case on compilation from several sources, of seven of these movements occurring in Canada and Greenland are presented. The social, economic, political, and cultural characteristics of the history of Eskimo-European contact in each area where a movement developed are then considered within a conceptual framework based primarily on Burridge's analysis of millenarian movements. The social, economic, political, and ideological features of each movement are considered in relation to the specific features of the contact situation in which each occurred. The movements are then considered comparatively in order to identify

regularities in developmental processes, and are found to follow courses of development similar to those identified by Burrige and by Wallace in their studies of such movements. The movements are seen as developing in response to situations in which environmental, social, and cultural changes undermined a traditional or current world view and ethos, and they are interpreted as attempts to establish a new religious system incorporating a more satisfactory world view and ethos.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. INTRODUCTION . . . . .	1
The Study of Religious Movements . . . . .	3
The Problem of Eskimo Religious Movements. . . . .	15
II. ANALYTICAL CONSIDERATIONS. . . . .	21
The Sense of 'Religious' in 'Religious Movements'. . . . .	21
A Framework for the Analysis of Religious Movements . . . . .	29
III. ESKIMO RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS: ACCOUNTS . . . . .	44
Sukkertoppen, West Greenland 1787. . . . .	45
Friedrichstal, South Greenland 1853-1854. . . . .	48
Godthaab, West Greenland 1907-1908. . . . .	49
Nain, Labrador 1873-1874 . . . . .	52
Iglulik 1920 . . . . .	54
Home Bay, Baffin Island 1921 . . . . .	55
Belcher Islands 1941 . . . . .	57
IV. ESKIMO RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS: THE MOVEMENTS IN THEIR SOCIO-CULTURAL CONTEXT . . . . .	61
Eskimo Ethos and World View . . . . .	61
World View and Ethos in the Contact Situation. . . . .	72
The Religious Movements . . . . .	76
Sukkertoppen 1787. . . . .	76

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
Friedrichstal 1853-1854 . . . . .	92
Godthaab 1907-1908 . . . . .	100
Nain 1873-1874 . . . . .	109
Iglulik 1920 . . . . .	124
Home Bay 1921. . . . .	138
Belcher Islands 1941 . . . . .	148
V. ESKIMO RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS: COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION . . . . .	159
Comparative Analysis . . . . .	159
Conclusion . . . . .	171
Notes . . . . .	176
References Cited . . . . .	179



## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

The two and one half centuries of culture contact in the North American Arctic have resulted in significant changes in Eskimo cultures. These changes have been most rapid and dramatic in the past thirty years, and have coincided with the development of anthropological interest in acculturation. Consequently, much of the anthropological study of the Eskimos has been concerned with change. Studies of acculturation in the Arctic, however, have not generally considered those forms of culture change, usually termed (following Wallace, 1956) "revitalization movements", which involve the attempt by members of a culture to establish a new culture in entirety or in substantial part. A number of such attempts have been reported to have occurred among the Eskimos, but they have been neither comprehensively described, except in one case, nor adequately analyzed. The aim of this thesis is to provide a reasonably complete description of seven of these movements, and more significantly, to provide an analysis of each movement in relation to the socio-cultural and environmental situation in which it occurred, and a comparative analysis of the processes of development of

these movements.

The theoretical orientation of the analysis of the movements is derived primarily from Burridge's (1969) analysis of millenarian movements, and his formulations provide the basis for the development of a conceptual framework to be utilized in identifying significant relationships within and among the movements. While the movements which will be considered here are all religious in nature, the supernaturalist approaches to the study of religion traditionally utilized in anthropology would be of limited analytical productivity in considering them since each involved more than just the relations between humans and the supernatural. Central to the analysis of the movements, then, is a view of religion, based on Burridge (1969) and further developed with reference to Geertz (1957), which avoids such limitations: religion involves a concern with the nature and ordering of power and serves to integrate and validate a people's world view and ethos. Within this framework, movements are viewed as responses to situations in which a group's world view and ethos are brought into question.

In light of this orientation, such movements will be termed here "religious movements" and will be defined as attempts by the members of a culture to establish, in whole or in substantial part, a new religious system

incorporating a new world view and ethos.

### The Study of Religious Movements

The study of religious movements has been of interest to anthropologists since at least the late 19th century. Mooney's 1896 study of the Ghost Dance of 1890 and Williams' 1923 work on the Vailala Madness are the earliest major field studies on this subject. Other early works include Chinnery and Haddon's 1917 article, based on Chinnery's observations, which described five new religious cults in British New Guinea, and the studies by Chamberlain (1913) and Wallis (1918) which were based on data gathered by others.

These movements have been identified by numerous terms, including: messianic movement (Barber 1941; Sundkler 1961; Ribeiro 1970), nativistic movement (Linton 1943), revitalization movement (Wallace 1956), millenarian movement (Talmon 1965; Burridge 1969; Cohn 1970), crisis cult (LaBarre 1971), religious movement (Mair 1958-59; Fernandez 1964), accomodative movement (Voget 1956; Worsley 1968), vitalistic movement (Smith 1954), nativistic cult (Nash 1955), archaic form of social movement (Hobsbawm 1965), cult movement (Smith 1959; Voget 1959), redemptive movement (Aberle 1966; Jorgensen 1972) and articulatory movement (Lurie 1971).

Various authors have proposed typologies or classifications for understanding and explaining this form of socio-cultural change. Stating that nativistic movements are concerned "with particular elements of culture, never with cultures as wholes", Linton (1943) classified nativism as either revivalistic or perpetuative. In the former, old elements of a culture are revived, in the latter, present elements are maintained or perpetuated. He further divided movements into rational and magical nativism on the basis of the means used to attain the desired ends. The intersection of these two dimensions resulted in a four-fold classification of movements: rational-revivalistic, magical-revivalistic, rational-perpetuative and magical-perpetuative. In The Peyote Religion among the Navaho, Aberle (1966) proposed a classification based, as was Linton's, on the intersection of two dimensions, the amount of change and the locus of change, for what he termed social movements. Those movements characterized by total change with the locus of change being supra-individual are called transformative movements; with the locus of change being the individual, they are redemptive movements. Partial change with a supra-individual locus results in reformative movements; with an individual locus, it results in alterative movements. Wilson's (1969) classification of sects based on their "response to the world" indicated

seven types: conversionist, revolutionary, introversionist, manipulationist, thaumaturgical, reformist and utopian. He stated that the classification is applicable to non-Western and non-Christian movements as well as to those in the Christian tradition. Hobsbawm (1965) delimited three types of social movements, primarily on the basis of the socio-economic systems in which they occur: primitive movements, associated with pre-capitalist societies; archaic movements (the focus of his study), associated with a rapid transition to capitalist society; and modern movements, associated with established capitalist socio-economic systems. Smith (1959) classified cult movements into three types: nativistic, characterized by the revival or perpetuation of aspects of culture; vitalistic, involving "newly perceived aspects of culture"; and synthetic, identified by the combination of elements from different cultures. The author further suggested that "movements may be characterized by certain contextual features", viz., messianism, millenarism, revivalism, militancy and reformation. Criticizing typologies of religious movements since they are, in effect, classifications of whole movements on the basis of a few traits, Kopytoff (1964) proposed that, rather than being classified, movements should be compared on the basis of "analytical profiles" which would consider, and treat

equally, all traits found in movements.

Most of the general works on religious movements are not, however, primarily concerned with classification, but are directed at an interpretation of the nature, causes or functions of these movements. Wallace (1956) based his analysis of movements on a psychological model of society. Viewing society as an organismic system, he proposed that when under stress societies will take emergency measures to maintain homeostasis. 'Revitalization movements' are considered such a measure, and are seen as arising under conditions of individual stress. This stress is essentially psychological in nature and results from the inability of individuals' mazeways ("the mazeway is nature, society, culture, personality and body image as seen by one person" [1956:266] and it is the individual's equivalent to the group's 'culture') to prescribe actions which reduce chronic physiological stress. A revitalization movement then is an "...effort by members of a society to construct a more satisfying culture" (1956:265). He also attempted to delimit the structure of the revitalization process by identifying stages in the development of movements. Millenarian movements are viewed by Burrige (1969) as arising in situations in which a society's current assumptions about the nature and order of power in the world, and the rules and activities relating to that

power, are unable to account for a changed world or to provide for individual integrity under changed conditions. As responses to such situations, movements represent experiments in constructing more satisfying cultures. Three phases of a movement are identified: the first phase is characterized by doubt concerning the current system, the second involves general millenarian activities and the appearance of the movement and the third entails an attempt to establish new assumptions, rules and activities. Relative deprivation, defined as "a negative discrepancy between legitimate expectation and actuality" (Aberle 1970:209) is central to Aberle's (1970) theory of social movements. He viewed movements as responses to such conditions, but indicated that other responses are also possible. He identified four types of deprivations: possessions, status, behavior, and worth, and found that the ideology of any movement will be related to the type of deprivation a group may be experiencing. Mair (1958-59) found a similarity among all the religious movements in North America, Africa and Oceania that she examined, and she saw this to be the result of the same social processes operating in the incorporation of small-scale societies into the industrial economy in each of the three areas. She attributed the differences among the movements to differences in the contact situation and incorporation

process in each area. Lanternari (1963) viewed religious movements as arising out of situations of oppression, which are primarily a result of contact between cultures in different stages of development, but which may also derive from internal sources. The movements themselves are considered to be innovative in character and reformatory in their effect on society.

Rather than focussing on a general theory of movements, however, the majority of studies concern specific movements or the movements in a particular geographical area. These studies are often analytical as well as descriptive, and attempt to identify the significant factors involved in the origin and development of the movements considered. Many of these specific studies also suggest that the explanations put forward have some general applicability.

The rise of separatist churches in Africa has been described by Sundkler (1961) and Daneel (1971). Sundkler identifies two major types in South Africa: Ethiopian, those churches which represent secessions from European mission churches, and Zionist, those which are primarily syncretistic and have no direct connections to any of the mission churches. The Ethiopian churches tend to utilize the traditional Zulu pattern of kingship as an integrative principle; the Zionist churches are focussed primarily on healing. The emphasis in both types of churches is on



African autonomy. Daneel classifies separatist churches in Rhodesia as Ethiopian and 'spirit-type'. In structure and orientation, they are similar to those described by Sundkler. Analyzing and classifying African religious movements in general, Fernandez (1964) proposed a typology based on the intersection of two dimensions, the source of the symbolism found in a movement (acculturated or traditional), and the way in which this symbolism is used (instrumentally or expressively). Utilizing this typology, he discussed the role of religious movements in the socio-political development of modern Africa.

The Oceanian movements are perhaps the most widely known religious movements, and are usually called cargo cults since they often focussed on the arrival of European goods (cargo) destined for the believers. Haddon (Chinnery and Haddon 1917) saw oppression as a causal factor in the rise of religious movements in New Guinea. Williams (1969) found the Taro Cult to be the result of boredom. The introduction of steel tools

...left him [the native gardener] with a good deal of time on his hands. Whereas he must have formerly worked off much of his surplus energy with repeated blows of a stone axe, he now strikes a few blows with a steel axe and his energy remains bottled in his bosom (Williams 1969:92).

Analyzing cargo cults which took place in New Guinea and the Solomon Islands, Cochrane (1970:163) proposed that

they were "...attempts to force Europeans (and Melanesians in the 1963 movement) to recognize indigenous concepts of status." On the basis of his experience in Tikopia, Firth (1955) indicated that cargo-cult type activities may occur without the development of an organized movement. He further suggested that cults tended to occur as a result of several factors relating to a disparity between desires and the ability to satisfy them. Burridge's (1970) study of cargo cults in Tangu focussed on the social and moral situation which gave rise to these movements. Worsley (1968) reviewed all recorded cargo cults in Melanesia and identified colonial oppression as the cause of cult formation. He interpreted the cults as pre-political and proto-nationalistic movements which, with sufficient sophistication on the part of Melanesians, would be in large measure replaced by nationalist movements and political parties.

The majority of European movements, and those in the European tradition, have developed within the Christian ambience and have generally been focussed on the imminent Second Coming of Christ or on the establishment of utopian communities. Cohn (1970) viewed medieval European religious movements as extremely varied in social composition and function. His study is focussed on those movements which he considered the most radical, and he

concluded that these revolutionary millenarisms arose among anomic, unorganized populations as a result of disasters or in the midst of wider social unrest. Weinstein (1970) provided an essentially historical analysis of the Savonarola movement. He indicated that it did not have its beginnings in economic crisis among those suffering deprivation, but rather it found supporters among the wealthiest and best educated Florentines of the time. Intellectual and socio-political factors in the Taborite ideology have been discussed by Kaminsky (1970). Cross (1965) has written a history of religious movements (enthusiastic religion) in western New York during the first half of the 19th century. Carden (1971) presented a history of the Oneida community, and offered some reasons for the failure of the original utopian ideals of John Humphrey Noyes. Included within the European millenarian tradition are the various 'space-men' movements, most common in North America, which usually involve the expectation that believers will be rescued from the imminent end of the world by beings from outer space. Festinger, Riecken and Schachter's (1964) socio-psychological analysis, based on participant observation, is a thorough account of such a movement. A number of movements within the Christian ambience have focussed on specific statements from that religion's scriptures. LaBarre (1969) has studied one such

movement in the southern United States, the snake-handling cult, and concluded that it, like other movements, was a psychological response of economically and socially deprived groups to rapid social change.

Most of the literature on South American movements concerns the various Brazilian messianic movements. Ribeiro (1970) has presented a brief summary and classification of these and has emphasized the role of individuals' motivations in the formation of these movements. One of the earliest descriptions of such a movement is provided by da Cunha in his treatment of the Canudos incident (1944; original 1902). It is detailed, but essentially literary and highly colored by the author's psychological and biological beliefs. In her study of the 'Hallelujah' religion among the Carib speaking peoples of Guiana, Venezuela and Brazil, Butt (1967) proposed that one feature, the ambivalent reaction to the white man, was common in the teachings of all the prophets. In the Caribbean, the Ras Tafari movement has been extensively studied. Simpson (1970) described the movement and viewed it as arising out of deprivation.

The numerous 'New Religions' that have occurred in Japan during the last three and one half centuries have been analyzed by McFarland (1970). He interpreted them as "...responses to the endemic recurrently intensified social crisis..." (1970:54) that has been characteristic of

Japanese history. Other movements in Asia have been considered by Boardman (1970) and van der Kroef (1970). Boardman indicated that the Taiping movement occurred at a time of "pre-revolutionary unrest" in China. He explained the origins and content of the ideology of this movement which promised the millenium upon the ouster of the Manchu dynasty. Analyzing three Indonesian movements, van der Kroef identified European colonization and mission activities as the catalytic agents in their formation, and discussed similarities and differences in psychological, cultural and ideological aspects of the movements.

The first field study of a religious movement was of a North American Indian movement. Since Mooney's study of the Ghost Dance, movements in North America have been extensively and intensively researched. In the anthropological literature on religious movements, this area is perhaps the most thoroughly covered. Mooney (1896) attributed the rise of the Ghost Dance to stress brought on by poverty and oppression. Nash (1955) found that acceptance of the 1870 Ghost Dance on Klamath Reservation was due to deprivation and that the particular forms the movement took among the three groups present on the reservation were related to the nature of deprivation experienced by each group. Finding corroborative data in Nash's work, Barber (1941) proposed that the difference

in the spread of the Ghost Dance of 1870 and that of 1890 was due to differences in the degree of deprivation experienced in the areas where it was accepted. Hill (1944) indicated that their fear of the dead and ghosts was the foremost reason for the Navahos' rejection of the Ghost Dance. LaBarre's (1964) monograph on Peyotism included a comparative study of the Peyote Cult on the Plains and a review of Peyote studies. Identifying Peyotism as a redemptive movement, Aberle (1966) interpreted it as a response to deprivation brought about by forced government livestock reduction among the Navahos. Following Aberle (1966), Jorgensen (1972) classified the Sun Dance among the Shoshones and Utes as a redemptive movement and attributed it to deprivation, but absolute rather than relative. He suggested, however, that deprivation alone was insufficient in explaining the acceptance and persistence of the Sun Dance, and proposed that the politico-economic system that caused the deprivation, the aesthetic value of the Sun Dance, and the religious experience it provided for its adherents must also be considered. Howard (1976) described the modern Gourd Dance and discussed the tribal distribution of its traditional antecedents. Once found only on the Plains, it has now spread to other tribes, and in the author's view become an Indian revitalization or (following Lurie,

1971) articulatory movement. Wallace (1969) discussed, in its historical and cultural context, the revitalization movement led by Handsome Lake among the Iroquois.

#### The Problem of Eskimo Religious Movements

Although most geographical areas, and North America in particular, have been well covered in the anthropological literature on religious movements, one area has been largely ignored: the North American Arctic. A recent comprehensive survey of movements by LaBarre (1971) made no mention of any in Alaska, the Canadian Arctic or Greenland. In his study of culture change among the Eskimos, Hughes (1965:12) indicated that there has been a lack of research on "...the interpenetration of aboriginal religious beliefs with those of Christianity..." in Greenland; such is the case in Canada and Alaska as well.<sup>1</sup> Consideration of religious change in the anthropological literature has been largely limited to noting the replacement of traditional beliefs by Christianity, as in Honigmann (1962:69), or the reinterpretation of traditional religion in a Christian framework, e.g., Vallee (1967:181-182). Some brief descriptions and some very brief analyses comprise the extent of the available anthropological literature on religious movements in the Arctic.

Stefansson (1913:429) reported that there had been

claims of special revelations and births of heralded saviours among the Eskimos for many years. He referred the reader to an unspecified publication by Rasmussen to obtain further information. In addition to this unspecified work, which is Rasmussen (1908), brief accounts have also been provided by Wallis (1943) and Mathiassen (1928). Analyzing the history of Eskimo-European relations in Povungnituk, Balikci (1959:129) commented upon the appearance of "messianic beliefs" during the period 1930-1950; he saw these as reflecting the ecological crisis present at the time. Considering this same period of time in Povungnituk in a later work, Balikci (1960:148) elaborated somewhat on the content of these "messianic beliefs", suggesting that "...such syncretistic processes of change might be of interest" (1960:139). Johnson (1962:67), referring to a religious movement which occurred in the Belcher Islands, related an account which is at variance with the five other accounts of the same movement. Worsley (1968:225), providing no references, reported that a movement took place in Greenland in the 20th century during which people stopped hunting and ate their stores of food, and he noted the occurrence of a movement on Baffin Island in the 20th century. Giving Mathiassen (1928) and Honigmann (1962) as references, Burridge (1969) stated:



in North America the Eskimos seem to have remained immune [from millenarian movements] until, with the economic disaster of the 'thirties which ruined the fur trade on which they had almost entirely depended, some groups decided to mould their lives anew (1969:33).

However, the movement which Mathiassen related occurred in 1920, and the one to which Honigmann referred occurred in 1941 in an area in which trapping had always been a marginal activity. Attributing their occurrence to the conflicting teachings of missionaries, Jenness (1964:67) identified two religious movements in the Canadian Arctic. He (1967:19) offered a similar explanation for the appearance of native reformers in Greenland during the early missionary period, and stated that these were no longer in evidence by the end of the 18th century. This would not appear to be the case, however, since movements were reported in Greenland in the 19th and 20th centuries.

The inadequate treatment of Eskimo religious movements in the anthropological literature has not, however, been entirely a result of lack of data. There are at least seven movements in Greenland and Canada, one of which was observed by an anthropologist, that can be reasonably well documented. These are the subject of this thesis.

In reference to the anthropological study of religious movements, Belshaw has indicated that contributions can be made in two ways: