

An Introduction to Shamanism

GRADE LEVEL

This lesson plan is designed to be used with students aged 12-15 years.

OBJECTIVE

Students will create a “dictionary” listing Inuktitut terms related to shamanism and their English equivalents. Students will then read various topics related to shamanism using their “dictionary” as a reference guide. Students will keep their dictionaries for later lessons.

MATERIALS

- Chapter 1: “Shamanism and the Life Cycle: Names, Souls and Spirits”, *Interviewing Inuit Elders*, Volume 4, pgs 9-16:
<http://www.nac.nu.ca/OnlineBookSite/vol4/pdf/Chapter1.pdf>
- Map of North America, Canada, Nunavut:
<http://atlas.gc.ca/site/english/maps/reference/outlinecanada/canada12>

ACTIVITY

- 1 In small groups, ask students to brainstorm various religions practiced throughout the world today. List them on the board.
- 2 Locate Nunavut on a map. Explain that today approximately 80% of Inuit living in Nunavut are Christians. Prior to the early 1900s, Inuit had never been exposed to Christianity. They lived a life centered on the earth, the animals and the spirit of their ancestors. Shamanism is an element of traditional Inuit spirituality. Shamans were not priests, but, rather, tradesmen who specialized in the unseen powers of the world.

“The task of the shamans is to be able to make journeys through these boundaries, journeying back and forth between the human and the supernatural, bringing special knowledge, and using it for better or for ill.”
~ HUGH BRODY, FILM REVIEW OF *ATANARJUAT THE FAST RUNNER*, *ISUMA INUIT STUDIES READER*, p.12
- 3 Read background information on shamanism or give a copy to each student and have them read along. Write “angakkuit” and “tuurngait” on the board, as well as their English equivalents of “shaman” and “helping spirits.”
- 4 Ask students what made the spirits of the polar bear and the walrus so sought after as “tuurngait” (*helping spirits*)? (*size and ability to move in water and on land*).
- 5 Ask what other animal spirits would prove useful? Why?
- 6 Explain that in 2001, Bernard Saladin d’Anglure published part of a series entitled *Interviewing Inuit Elders*. The Inuit elders he interviewed discussed shamanism from an Inuit perspective. Most previously written materials about Inuit had been produced by non-Inuit, resulting in many misrepresentations. Discuss the differences between materials written by outsiders and those from an Inuit perspective with students.
- 7 Break students into pairs or small groups. Give each student (or pair) a copy of Chapter 1: “Shamanism and the Life Cycle: Names, Souls and Spirits” from Volume 4 of the *Interviewing Inuit Elders Series*, pages 9-16.

An Introduction to Shamanism (cont'd)

- 8 Ask students if anyone remembers the traditional language of the Inuit (Inuktitut)? Explain that since Inuit elders are being interviewed, many Inuktitut words will be used in the text.
- 9 Before reading the selection, have students create an Inuktitut/English “dictionary.” Pairs will create a two column table, with the first column titled “Inuktitut” and the second “English”.
- 10 Students are to skim the selection, listing Inuktitut terms in the first column (they are in italics) and their English meanings in the second. If no English meaning is given, students should try to figure out the meaning using context clues.
- 11 When students are done, have them read their selection, using their “dictionary” as a guide.

EVALUATION

When students are done, have them share their terms. List them on the board or overhead projector. Students should add to their dictionary words they have missed or change incorrect entries.

Lead a discussion about the selection. Possible guiding questions:

- In our culture, how do we arrive at the names we give our children? What is the significance of the names given to children in the Inuit culture? (p.9)
- “*A source of vitality, power, social bonding*”, a strong bond was created between a child and his/her namesake (atiqatigiik)
- Names given before birth, at birth or changed later if required
- Names sometimes came to parents in a dream – must be respected
- “*Shamans would be given a helping spirit with the same name as their birth name*”
- According to the elders interviewed, what are the two types of shamans? (p.10-11)
- How could someone become an “angakkuit”? Could women be shamans?

REFERENCES

Angilirq, Paul Apak; Cohn, Norman; Saladin d’Anglure, Bernard, *Atanarjuat The Fast Runner*. Toronto: Coach House Books and Isuma Publishing, 2002

Isuma Publishing – a division of Igloolik Isuma Productions: <http://isuma.ca/buy>

Kessler, Deirdre, *Isuma Teacher’s Resource Guide*, Montreal: Isuma Publishing, 2004

Robinson, Gillian, *Isuma Inuit Studies Reader*, Montreal: Isuma Publishing, 2004

Teacher Notes on Shamanism

Before colonization by Europeans, the Inuit lived a life centered on the earth, the animals and the spirit of their ancestors. Shamanism is an element of traditional Inuit spirituality. Shamans, or “angakkuit” in Inuktitut, are men and women viewed as doctors, healers and advisors. These healers were born with and skilled in the ability to see spirits.

In the past, shamans:

- Were central figures in ceremonies
- Foretold weather patterns and movements of game animals
- Cured illnesses
- Retrieved lost or stolen souls
- Were assisted by good and bad spirit helpers, known as “tuurngait”, in protecting the health and welfare of their communities.

The following material is taken from page 39 of *Atanarjuat The Fast Runner* by Paul Apak Angilirq, Zacharias Kunuk, Herve Paniaq, Pauloosie Qulitalik, and Norman Cohn. (Toronto: Coach House Books and Isuma Publishing, 2002).

ANGAKKUIT (SHAMANS) AND TUURNGAIT (HELPING SPIRITS)

A shaman is a mediator between the human world and the spirit world, between the living and the dead, and between animals and human society. A future shaman must be chosen by a spirit – maybe one of his deceased parents, maybe his namesake, maybe an animal whose skin was used to wipe his newborn body, or maybe any spirit that has appeared to him. This helping spirit (tuurngait) would provide the future shaman with assistance and guarantee him success in his practice. Through it, the shaman could ally himself with other spirits. The spirits of the polar bear and the walrus were especially sought after. Their size and their ability to move in water and on land made them powerful mediators.

A shrewd shaman usually had several helping spirits, thus enabling him to move about in the different elements – land, water and air – and also travel backward or forward in time, to visit the dead and the great nature spirits, and to enter the hereafter in the heavens or under the sea.

Each species of animal and each element of nature – the heavenly bodies, the winds, the rivers and streams – was governed by a spirit master (inua) who not only had a human form but could also feel emotions and be willing to act. These were the spirit masters who chose to become shaman’s helpers.