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A look at traditional Inuit life

Glen Schaefer in **The Province**

“Colourful” might seem an odd word to describe the snow-bound story told in *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen*

But the second feature from co-directors Zacharias Kunuk and Norman Cohn (*Atanarjuat: the Fast Runner*) moves at its own organic pace to flesh out the lives of a group of Inuit in the early decades of the last century, as they shift from shamanism to Christianity.

The fictionalized movie is based on work by a Danish ethnographer who traveled with the Inuit in the 1920s, but the filmmakers let their story unfold mostly from the point of view of this Inuit family – shaman-patriarch Avva (Pakak Innuksuk) and his willful daughter Apak (Leah Angutimarik).

The beautiful daughter passed over the man she loved for one her father chose. That man died, and she hasn't much time for the one she married afterwards. We pick all this up over the course of the family's travels, during ice-bound parties in various igloos and as the characters simply talk to the Europeans and us.

Apak communes with her dead husband in erotic, hallucinogenic trances set to a high, sighing soundscape, while her father chides her for living in the past. Avva, meanwhile, recounts his own childhood for the camera, detailing the destiny that let him to a life accompanied by “helping spirits.”

The movie draws us slowly into this complicated life as jealousies, jokes, infidelities and rivalries, leaving it to us to discern who the real people are among these characters, and who are the spirits, depicted as just as real. Kunuk and Cohn's camera captures small touches of death and life: a dead dog's corpse dangling off the back of a sled as its siblings keep tugging the sled across the ice, a toddler mugging and fretting while tucked into her mother's parka at a party in an igloo.

The loose narrative finally ends when Avva and his family meet a Christianized community of Inuit, who adapt the communion ritual to their own frozen circumstances.

The Europeans who watch them remain on the periphery, but this slow journey manages to give depth and substance to the traditional Inuit life, even as we watch it wane.