

ANGAKOK

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Angakok

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1. Core Definition and Nomenclature

The term **Angakok** (plural: **Angakkuit**) refers to the central spiritual figure within traditional Inuit religion and cosmology, widely recognized as a shaman or spiritual specialist. The word itself originates from the Greenlandic Inuit language, though variations of the concept and term exist across the diverse Inuit and Yupik groups, spanning from Siberia to Alaska, Canada, and Greenland. The Angakok serves as the indispensable mediator between the physical human world (*inua*) and the invisible, often dangerous, spiritual realms (*anirniit*).

Unlike religious clergy in centralized, codified belief systems, the Angakok does not derive authority from an established institution but rather from direct personal experience, arduous training, and the successful acquisition of helping spirits (*tuurngait*). Their role is fundamentally pragmatic, focused less on theological dogma and more on the immediate well-being and survival of the community. In the harsh Arctic environment, where survival hinges on unpredictable weather and migratory animal patterns, the Angakok's ability to influence these forces--or at least to divine their movements--makes them the most powerful individual within the band, often functioning as a combined religious leader, physician, and counselor.

The essential function, as noted in traditional accounts, is to resolve crises caused by spiritual imbalance. This imbalance is often attributed to violations of strict cultural taboos (*pijuaq*), which anger powerful nature deities, particularly the sea goddess Sedna (or Takannaaluk). When taboos are broken, the spirits withhold vital resources, leading to illness, starvation, or persistent bad weather. The Angakok must enter a trance state, journey to the spiritual realms, identify the transgression, appease the spirits, and restore harmony, ensuring the continued flow of necessary resources, such as hunting animals.

2. Cosmology and Spiritual Framework

The necessity of the Angakok's role is rooted deeply in the complex, animistic framework of Inuit cosmology. The traditional Inuit world is understood to consist of three primary realms: the sky world (Qilak), the earth or human world, and the underworld (often associated with the deep ocean). Crucially, the world is filled with spirits (*anirniit*), which inhabit all natural phenomena--animals, objects, and people. The term *anirniq* literally means 'breath,' implying that every entity possesses an animating life force or soul. Human health and communal success depend on maintaining respect and balance with these powerful spiritual forces.

Two of the most formidable spiritual entities requiring the Angakok's mediation are **Sila** and

Sedna. Sila is the great spirit representing the weather, the atmosphere, and consciousness itself; controlling the winds, storms, and the overall conditions necessary for survival. Sedna, the ruler of the sea mammals, dwells at the bottom of the ocean and controls the fate of the hunters. When human actions, such as violating hunting taboos or failing to show adequate respect to animal souls, cause pollution or offense, Sedna becomes angry, and her hair becomes matted with the souls of the transgressions. She then traps the seals, whales, and fish, leading to famine. The Angakok's most challenging journey is often the spiritual descent to Sedna's domain to comb her hair, pacify her, and restore the flow of game.

Beyond these great deities, the Angakok interacts with various local spirits and malevolent entities, such as the **Tupilak** (a monster created by witchcraft) or **Inua** (the spirit/owner of a place or object). The spiritual environment is perceived as dynamic and often hostile, necessitating the specialized skills of the shaman to navigate it successfully. The Angakok does not wield personal power, but rather channels the power granted by their assisting spirits, who act as their interpreters, guides, and protectors during dangerous spiritual travels.

3. The Path and Training of an Angakok

Becoming an Angakok is a demanding and often involuntary calling, fundamentally different from choosing an occupation. It typically begins with a period of severe physical or psychological distress, often involving a near-death experience, prolonged illness, or isolation, which marks the individual as having been touched by the spiritual world. This suffering is interpreted as the spirits preparing the candidate for their life's work. This initial phase, characterized by vision quests and heightened sensitivity, is critical for demonstrating the capacity to traverse the boundaries between worlds.

Following this initial selection, formal training takes place, usually under the tutelage of an established, respected Angakok. The training phase, which can last for years, involves periods of intense solitude, fasting, and exposure to extreme cold. The goal of this preparation is to achieve a state of spiritual emptiness and vulnerability, allowing the individual to shed their ordinary human limitations and perceive the deeper reality. A crucial step involves the symbolic "dismemberment" and "reconstruction" of the candidate's body by the spirits, a metaphorical process signifying the death of the old self and the birth of the spiritually capable one.

The ultimate success of the initiate hinges on the acquisition of the **Tuurngait**, or helping spirits. These spirits, which may take the form of animals (such as polar bears, birds, or foxes) or mythical beings, are bound to the Angakok through specific rituals and agreements. The Tuurngait provide the necessary power and knowledge (*isuma*) for the shaman to perform their duties, including the ability to fly to the heavens or dive beneath the sea in trance. An Angakok's reputation and efficacy are directly proportional to the power and loyalty of their spiritual retinue, making the maintenance

of these relationships a lifelong commitment.

4. Primary Functions and Ritual Practices

The functions of the Angakok are comprehensive, encompassing virtually every aspect of communal life that falls outside the scope of practical hunting and domestic tasks. As the source material indicates, these functions are predictive, remedial, and ceremonial, all aimed at survival.

Weather Prediction and Control: A primary survival task involves predicting meteorological events and influencing them. The Angakok uses ecstatic flight or spiritual contact to determine the intentions of Sila. This predictive capacity is vital for planning successful hunts and safe travel. If a storm threatens, the Angakok may perform rituals to calm the winds or clear the path for hunters.

Divination of Animal Movements: To prevent starvation, the Angakok must divine the location and movement of caribou, seals, and fish. Through trance or direct communication with the spirits of the animals (*anirniit*), the shaman guides the hunting parties, ensuring the community has adequate resources for the coming season. The Angakok mentioned in the source material, who "predicted that the Inuit animals would move east for the winter," exemplifies this crucial role in economic survival.

Healing and Soul Retrieval: Illness is often interpreted not as a physical malfunction but as the result of soul loss, intrusion by a malevolent spirit, or transgression of a taboo. The Angakok acts as a physician, diagnosing the spiritual root of the affliction. If a soul has been lost (stolen or wandered away), the shaman undertakes a spiritual journey to retrieve it, restoring the individual's health. They also exorcise intrusive evil spirits that may have entered the body.

Presiding over Ceremonies: The Angakok orchestrates major community rituals, particularly those surrounding critical life events (birth, death, naming) and seasonal shifts (harvesting or hunting rites). They ensure that the complex taboos associated with these events are observed correctly, thereby maintaining spiritual purity and communal safety.

Communication with Spiritual Beings: Perhaps the most distinctive function is serving as the sole conduit between the human community and the non-human entities. During public séances, often held in the dark or in an isolated setting, the Angakok enters a profound trance state, allowing their Tuurngait to speak through them, answering questions, giving warnings, and conveying the demands of powerful deities like Sedna.

5. Ritual Tools and Methods

The performance of the Angakok relies heavily on specific tools and ritual methods designed to induce the necessary trance state and facilitate communication with the spiritual world. These

practices distinguish them clearly from lay members of the community.

The most iconic tool is the **Qilaut** (or **Qilautaq**), the Inuit frame drum. Drumming is central to the ritual, as the monotonous, rhythmic beating helps the Angakok transition into the ecstatic state necessary for spiritual travel (*kayaktung*). The drumbeat is not merely musical; it is a sonic bridge that guides the shaman and calls the helping spirits into the ceremonial space. During the trance, the Angakok's voice may change pitch or dialect as different helping spirits speak through them, a phenomenon carefully observed and interpreted by the attending community members.

Furthermore, the manipulation of light and darkness plays a significant role. Séances are frequently conducted in total darkness, a practice that enhances the mystery and facilitates the collective imaginative experience of the spiritual journey. In this darkness, sounds--the shaman's chanting, the drum, and the perceived voices of the spirits--become paramount. Some Angakkuit wear specialized ceremonial clothing or amulets (*talisman*) given to them by their Tuurngait, often adorned with animal parts or symbolic carvings that denote their power and protect them during their journeys into dangerous spiritual territory.

6. Social Role and Authority

The Angakok occupies a unique and often paradoxical position of immense power and vulnerability within the small, interdependent Inuit band. While they possess considerable spiritual authority, this authority is earned continually through successful performance and is always subject to public scrutiny. A failed prophecy or an inability to cure a sickness can quickly erode their standing, as the pragmatic nature of Inuit society demands effective, tangible results from its spiritual leaders.

Socially, the Angakok serves as a key integrator, helping the community cope with existential uncertainty. They are the guardians of traditional knowledge, possessing an encyclopedic understanding of local taboos, the spiritual landscape, and genealogical history. Decisions regarding migration, hunting strategies, or managing community conflicts often rely heavily on the counsel provided by the Angakok, particularly when spiritual consequences are involved. However, the power is checked by the fact that the Angakok cannot force compliance; their strength lies in persuasion, spiritual necessity, and the fear of supernatural retribution.

It is important to note the dual nature of their power: while they are capable of immense good (healing, securing game), they are also capable of inflicting harm through sorcery (often involving the creation of a **Tupilak**). This potential for black magic ensures that the Angakok is respected but also often feared, establishing a careful balance of awe and apprehension in their relationship with the community.

7. Historical Context and Modern Transformation

The role of the Angakok flourished in the pre-contact era, serving as the cornerstone of spiritual and communal organization. However, the arrival of European explorers and, critically, Christian missionaries starting in the 18th and 19th centuries, initiated a dramatic decline and transformation of the traditional practice.

Missionaries, viewing the Angakok as practitioners of idolatry and witchcraft, systematically targeted them for conversion and suppression. The introduction of Western medicine and technology, which offered alternative explanations for illness and tools for survival, also undermined the shaman's traditional authority. In many regions, the public rituals and séances were outlawed or ceased under intense social pressure. The conversion of a powerful Angakok often resulted in the wholesale adoption of Christianity by their entire band, marking a rapid shift in religious allegiance.

While the traditional role has largely vanished in its overt, public form across much of the Arctic, the deep-seated spiritual beliefs and the cosmological framework that sustained the Angakok persist in contemporary Inuit culture. Concepts of soul loss, respect for animal spirits, and the power of Sedna remain relevant in cultural storytelling and modern identity. In some remote communities, elements of shamanic practice may still be maintained privately, often blended with Christian beliefs, but the political and social authority once wielded by the classical Angakok has been permanently diminished.

8. Debates and Anthropological Interpretations

Anthropological study of the Angakok has been central to comparative religious studies, particularly in the study of shamanism worldwide. Early observers, such as Knud Rasmussen, provided invaluable primary accounts, detailing the trance states and spiritual journeys. Modern scholarship frequently debates the precise nature of the Angakok's ecstatic experience.

Some theories posit that the shamanic trance state is a form of controlled dissociation, potentially linked to the intense psychological and physical stress inherent in Arctic life. Others emphasize the cultural and performative aspects, arguing that the trance is a communal event, guided by social expectation, where the audience is an active participant in validating the spiritual reality presented by the Angakok. The comparison with Siberian shamanism is also a frequent point of discussion, highlighting the circum-polar distribution of similar religious phenomena, particularly the emphasis on helping spirits and spiritual flight.

Crucially, the study of the Angakok has helped scholars understand that shamanism is not merely a collection of superstitions, but a sophisticated system of psychological coping and ecological management. By attributing environmental unpredictability (like famine or bad weather) to moral

transgressions or spiritual displeasure, the system provides a moral framework for maintaining social cohesion and ethical behavior necessary for survival in extreme conditions.

Further Reading

[Shamanism in the Arctic \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Shamanism \(Encyclopædia Britannica\)](#)

[Inuit Religion and Myths \(Greenland Culture Institute\)](#)

[Rasmussen, Knud. The Netsilik Eskimos: Social Life and Spiritual Culture. \(JSTOR link to relevant academic work\)](#)

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