

# *Kushtukas, Inyukons and Devils*

Some Inupiat Eskimo Folklore

by  
Jim Vandergriff

**T**he folklore of the Eskimos, like that of all peoples, changes as the culture changes, blending in the new forces with the old, but never seeming to die out. During the summer of 1978, while working as a salmon buyer in the Arctic, I became well-acquainted with several of the natives of Kotzebue, Alaska. Kotzebue is an important town of about 2400 people, mostly Eskimos, located just above the Arctic Circle [see map]. It is the point of contact with the outside world because it has a busy jet terminal and a lighterage company. Consequently, it is, if the term applies, the metropolitan center of the area. The surrounding villages must supply there and all outside air traffic must go through there. Kotzebue is also the regional headquarters of the local native corporation, the Northwest Arctic Native Association (NANA), and of the regional school district. The folklore of the area shows these various influences quite clearly, blending, for instance, the whiteman's automobiles and Christianity with native lore.

The tales treated in this paper were collected in a most unacademic manner from two young natives of the area. The Kushtuka and Inyukon tales were related by a 17 year-old girl from Kotzebue; the devil story was told by a 26 year-old Selawik man. In both cases, my efforts to tape the tales met with absolute refusal, as did my request that the informants write the stories down. The stories were related in voices full of belief. Later discussions of the material, my questions about weak points in the narratives, even the vocal disbelief of another friend, did not shake the informants' belief in the stories.

My first informant is a lifetime resident of Kotzebue, a high school senior and a member of the local Friends Church. Her religious system is a melange of Christianity and superstition, a combination typical among all ages in that area. Her belief in the Devil, for instance, is much more vivid and present than her belief in God.

Here are, in my words--transcribed only a few hours after I heard the tales--the stories she told to me. As we were driving during a midnight rainstorm, she told me the Kushtuka tales. The Kushtuka is the Inupiat Eskimo version of the bigfoot. However it differs from the bigfoot in that it has certain magical qualities, as the narratives will show.

The Kushtuka is like a bigfoot: it is very large, taller than a man, and hairy all over. It is different from a big foot in that it can change its looks so it looks like any person it sees.

Three friends of the informant--a girl from Point Hope, the girl's brother and father--were driving one night [in a place unknown to the informant] when the girl decided she needed to go to the bathroom. The father stopped the car [a generic term used by the Inupiat to designate any kind of private four-wheeled vehicle, whether truck, pick-up or automobile] and they all got out. The father and brother having also decided to go to the bathroom, the three each went in a different direction into the brush.

A Kushtuka came up and took on the appearance of the brother, without any of the three being aware of its presence. The sister returned to the car first and was waiting for the others when she saw what she thought was her brother emerge from the willows. He motioned for her to come to him, which she started to do. Just then, the real brother returned. Immediately perceiving the situation, he told her he was the real brother and that the other was a kushtuka. The kushtuka, of course, said the same thing.

This continued for some time until the father came out of the bushes and he and the brother chased the kushtuka away.

A second brief story involves the same people. They were driving, again in some isolated, indefinite place. The girl looked into the back, [i.e., bed] of the vehicle and saw a kushtuka standing there with its face pressed against the back window. She told her brother and father to look, which they did. They kept driving and looking back, and the kushtuka stayed there, trying to get into the cab. When they reached the lights of the town, they looked back and the creature was gone.

My efforts to elicit further details, such as why the kushtuka did these things, and how, were met with "I don't know." A cousin of the informant, who was with us at the time, could add neither explanations nor additional stories, but concurred in a belief in the kushtukas.

Belief in such magical creatures is not limited to Kushtuka stories, as the following information provided by the same

informant shows.

Many years ago, a band of Indians came into the Inupiat territory near the Noatak and Kobuk rivers and there was a great war between the Indians and Eskimos. The Eskimos were victorious. Since that war, ghostly creatures called Inyukon have plagued the Inupiat as a means of taking revenge for their defeat in the war. Typically, the Inyukon will sneak up behind a lone and unwary Eskimo in the dark and hit him or her on the legs or back with sticks. Sometimes, though, they will kill the Eskimos with hatchets. [Shortly before my arrival in Kotzebue, a young girl was murdered there; my informant theorized that the killer was an Inyukon.] One never sees the Inyukon, though my informant was uncertain why. Sometimes she seemed to think they were invisible, spirit-life creatures, but at other times she suggested they were real, solid beings. She told me twice of her personal encounters with these creatures. The first instance was related to me the day after it occurred. She was walking home around midnight when she felt something strike her several times on the back of the legs. She turned around and looked, but there was nothing there. So, she ran the rest of the way home, convinced that she had been struck by an Inyukon.

The second instance she related to me after she had told the Kushtuka tales: it had occurred the previous summer in a place called Sasaulik, Ak, just across the bay from Kotzebue.

My informant was picking blueberries when she felt a need to go to the bathroom, so she went into the willows to do so. As she was leaving the willows, she felt something strike her sharply on the calf. She looked down and saw a willow branch with which the Inyukon had hit her. She rejected my suggestion that it was a natural phenomenon with a matter-of-fact "No. A Inyukon hit me."

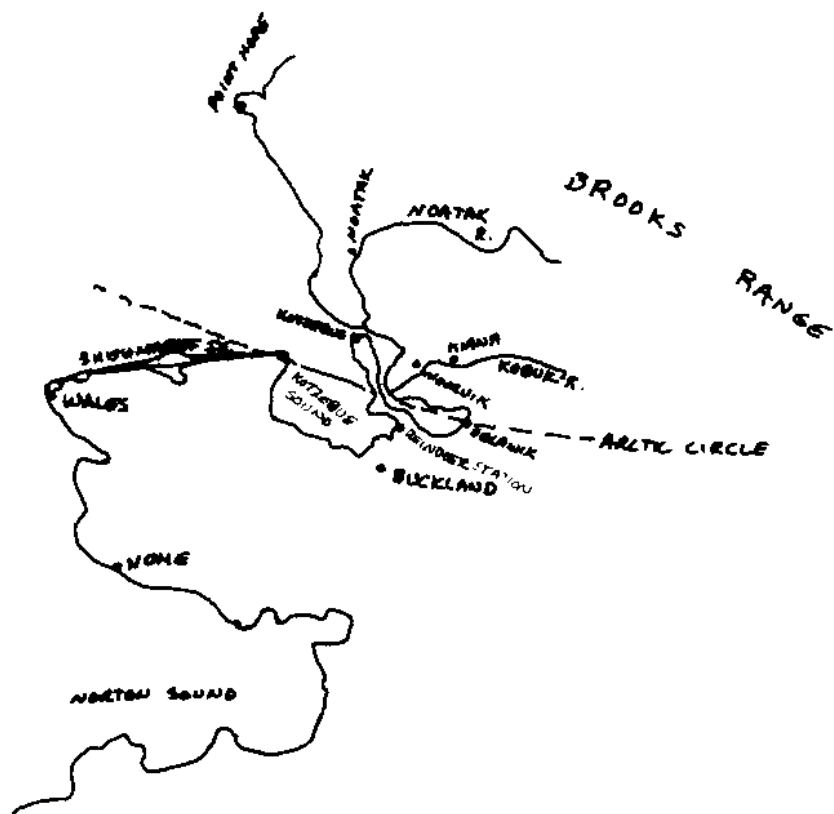
A second informant, a 26 or 27 year-old man from Selawik, a village on the Kobuk river, related the following to me.

A man was hunting one winter along the Kobuk. He had gone several days' journey up the river by dog sled when he came to an old house. Since he was very cold and hungry, the hunter went into the house. No one was there, but there was a fire in the stove and the house was warm.

Suddenly a woman entered from another room and beckoned to the man. He became very afraid and tried to run away, but she grabbed him. He tried to open the door, but it slammed shut by itself. The woman chased him around the room, but he finally got the door open and ran outside. Just as he ran through the door it slammed shut very hard and he felt something grab his parka. But

he kept going until he reached his sled. Then he turned around and looked at the house. It was burning down. Then he felt cold on his back. When he looked at his back, he saw that the back of his parka was gone. The woman was the devil.

Kotzebue, Alaska



COASTAL NORTHWEST ARCTIC