

**A Change of Subject: Perspectivism and Multinaturalism in Inuit Depictions of Interspecies Transformation**  
**Un changement de sujet : Perspectivisme et multinaturalisme dans les représentations inuit des transformations interspèces**

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Article abstract

A recurring theme within the complex cosmopolitics of pre-Christian Inuit is the transformation of persons—typically, but not exclusively, shamans (both human and nonhuman animal) and spirit beings—from one physical form, or “species,” to another. The motif is common in contemporary Inuit visual art and recent historic oral tradition, and less frequent (or less apparent) in precontact material culture. In this paper, I examine how interspecies relationships among Inuit may have been influenced by an ancient cosmology rooted in multinaturalism, which can be informed upon in an heuristic sense by Amerindian perspectivism, as described and developed by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (1998, 2004). Within this framework, I suggest a multinatural worldview is reflected in rare depictions of interspecies transformation on two precontact Inuit artifacts recovered from the large winter village site Pingiqqalik (NgHd-1), located near Igloodik, Nunavut.

# A Change of Subject: Perspectivism and Multinaturalism in Inuit Depictions of Interspecies Transformation

Sean P.A. Desjardins<sup>i</sup>

## ABSTRACT

A recurring theme within the complex cosmopolitics of pre-Christian Inuit is the transformation of persons—typically, but not exclusively, shamans (both human and nonhuman animal) and spirit beings—from one physical form, or “species,” to another. The motif is common in contemporary Inuit visual art and recent historic oral tradition, and less frequent (or less apparent) in precontact material culture. In this paper, I examine how interspecies relationships among Inuit may have been influenced by an ancient cosmology rooted in multinaturalism, which can be informed upon in an heuristic sense by Amerindian perspectivism, as described and developed by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (1998, 2004). Within this framework, I suggest a multinatural worldview is reflected in rare depictions of interspecies transformation on two precontact Inuit artifacts recovered from the large winter village site Pingiqqalik (NgHd-1), located near Igloodik, Nunavut.

## KEYWORDS

Inuit, human–animal relationships, archaeology, perspectivism, shamanism

## RÉSUMÉ

**Un changement de sujet: Perspectivisme et multinaturalisme dans les représentations inuit des transformations interspèces**

Un thème récurrent dans la cosmopolitique complexe des Inuit préchrétiens est la transformation des personnes - généralement, mais pas exclusivement, des chamanes (animaux humains et non-humains) et des êtres spirituels - d'une forme physique, ou « espèce », à une autre. Le motif est courant dans les arts visuels inuit contemporains et dans la tradition orale historique récente, et moins fréquent (ou moins apparent) dans la culture matérielle pré-contact. Dans cet article, j'examine comment les relations interspèces entre Inuit ont pu être influencées par une ancienne cosmologie enracinée dans le multinaturalisme, et informées de manière heuristique par le perspectivisme amérindien, décrit et développé par Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (1998, 2004). Dans ce cadre, je suggère que la vision multinaturelle du monde soit reflétée dans de rares représentations de la transformation interspèces de deux artefacts précontacts inuit récupérés sur le site du grand village d'hiver Pingiqqalik (NgHd-1), situé près d'Igloodik, au Nunavut.

## MOTS-CLÉS

Inuit, relations homme-animal, archéologie, perspectivisme, chamanisme

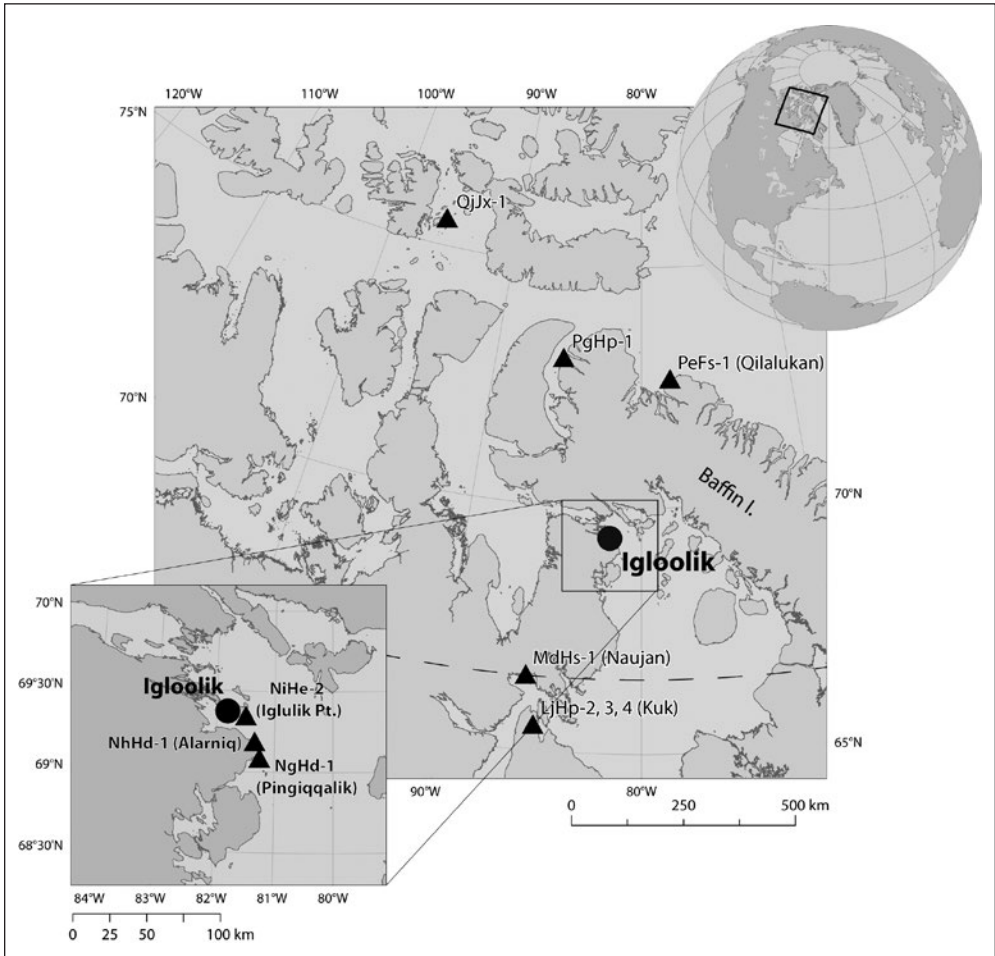
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**A**cross Arctic Canada and Greenland, Inuit have long maintained intricate and pliant relationships with nonhuman animals that in most regions comprised the entirety of the precontact diet. Modern Inuit cultural identity is closely linked to hunting, though the significance of the relationship extends far beyond subsistence; the delicate ecopolitics of hunting—the taking of lives—was likely the cornerstone of Inuit spiritual life before the introduction of Christianity between the late eighteenth and early twentieth centuries. According to the brother of an early twentieth-century shaman from the Igloodik region of present-day Nunavut, “The greatest peril of life lies in the fact that human food consists entirely of souls” (Rasmussen 1929, 56). For the most part, this danger was mediated through a complex series of observations of taboos and negotiations with animal spirits. An iconic example of interspecies relations in the Arctic is the act of transformation from one subject (or species) into another.

In this paper, I investigate the depiction of transformation in oral historical accounts from across Arctic Canada, as well as in select premodern (pre-twentieth-century) archaeological contexts. A link is established between Inuit transformational imagery and what Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (1998, 2004) refers to as the “perspectival” way in which many (if not all) North American Indigenous groups believe humans and nonhumans perceive reality. Perspectivism situates nonhuman agents in culture-laden worlds of their own, with nonhuman animals and supernatural beings having unique perspectives on other sentient beings (including humans) and all other phenomena they encounter. Indeed, the fundamental tenet of perspectivism is that humans and nonhumans share a universality of spirit and culture, and are only truly different from one another physically. My goal is to use perspectivism as a heuristic tool for developing a deeper understanding of Inuit–animal transformation, independent of Amazonian Indigenous experience.

I begin by describing perspectivism and expanding upon its possible epistemological relationship with pre-Christian Inuit shamanism. Shamans, often the only humans capable of assuming nonhuman perspectives at will, construct the interpretations of nonhuman motivations and behaviours necessary to successful hunting. I conclude by examining the implications of a core tenet of perspectivism—that of multinaturalism—for interspecies transformational imagery on two walrus-ivory artifacts recovered from Pingiqqalik (NgHd-1), a large multi-season village site in northern Foxe Basin, Nunavut, occupied periodically from circa AD 1330 to the early twentieth century (Desjardins 2018).



**Figure 1.** Map of the central Canadian Arctic, showing archaeological sites mentioned throughout the text.

## Perspectivism and multinaturalism

In his landmark paper on hunter-gatherer ontology, Viveiros de Castro (1998) suggested that if there exists a primordial organizing principle to the cosmologies of Amazonian Indigenous Peoples (or Amerindians), it is the cultural similitude of humans and nonhuman animals. According to Viveiros de Castro, Amerindians view select species of nonhumans (specifically, those classed as predators and prey) as persons with culture identical to that of humans. As such, the essence of all persons is humanity, and it is *multinaturalism* (one culture, many natures) that distinguishes Amerindian ontology from the multiculturalism (one nature, many cultures) of non-Amerindians.

Despite a universality of culture between humans and nonhumans within this framework, a significant divide exists obscuring a free flow of culture between persons with different natures: physical bodies and the unique perspectives they bestow upon individual consciousness. In order to move between and influence the worlds of the differently bodied, Amerindian peoples must observe a highly ordered system of proscriptive observations (taboos) administered by shamans. Because so much depends upon a subject's point of view, Viveiros de Castro refers to his framework as "perspectivism." Crucially (and controversially), perspectivism demands nonhumans see themselves as both culturally *and* physically human, even if they are not seen as such by "proper" humans. Together, human culture and physicality are "reflexive or apperceptive schematisms by which all subjects apprehend themselves" (1998, 477); humanity in its totality is the form through which all subjects experience their nature. The reason for this is that in Amazonian cosmological history, the universal form of personhood was physically fluid and culturally unified; "humans are those who continue as they have always been: animals are ex-humans, not humans ex animals" (1998, 472).

Viveiros de Castro (1998, 2004, 2012), Lima (1999), Vilaça (2005), and others have made strong arguments for perspectivism as an organizing principle in the belief systems of contemporary Indigenous Peoples in Amazonia. Outside of South America, strict applications of perspectival theory—animated (as it were) by the complex interplay of shamanism and subsistence hunting—has proven challenging, but also illuminating. With some caution, perspectivism has been used to discuss and describe Indigenous belief systems in Siberia (Willerslev 2007) and North and Central Asia (Pedersen 2001; Pedersen, Empson, and Humphrey 2007; Swancutt 2008). Application of perspectivism to archaeological contexts is rare (see Betts, Blair, and Black 2012; Betts, Hardenberg, and Stirling 2015; and Weismantel 2015 for exceptions). Notably, Hill (2018) has drawn a link between the shamanic talent for "seeing" from alternate perspectives and an artifact recovered from a human burial at Ipiutak (ca. AD 500–900) in western Alaska: the skull of a loon—a subject locally associated with superior vision—adorned with delicately carved ivory eyes. Weismantel (2015) argues that the tenets of perspectival thought—though compelling—are perhaps too rigid and "ahistorical" to apply in a doctrinal sense to disparate Indigenous belief systems, especially into their respective archaeological pasts.

Even among modern Amazonian Indigenous Peoples, it can sometimes be difficult to shoehorn ethnographic observations into a "typical" perspectival framework; Turner (2009, 22) argues such evidence points generally to "a non-anthropocentric version of animism rather than an anthropocentric perspectivism." Similarly, while embracing the idea that perspectivism is broadly at play among Yukaghirs in eastern Siberia, Willerslev (2007, 94) argues that the theory is largely disconnected from daily lived experience of most peoples. Stépanoff (2009) points out what he considers a paradox in the theory: that one subject

can assume (or merely imagine) the perspective of another without either (1) being a shaman, or (2) undergoing bodily change. He writes, “the thought experience of perspectivism (considering nonhuman perspectives) can be assumed by anybody who tells the myth or merely understands it” (288). He argues that instead of being perspectival, interspecies relationships among select Indigenous North Asian societies are realist, with subjects defined less by their perspectives than by the roles they play in each interaction.

This begs the question, is perspectivism fundamentally perceptual or abstract and conceptual, capable of being understood and experienced by all members of a society—not merely shamans? How might the trouble one encounters in applying the theory to disparate contexts be better understood? The answer may be that as strictly constructed, perspectivism is applicable only to those hunter-gatherer cultures for which it was formulated, and that the appeal of the theory to anthropologists (and archaeologists) lies in the highly compelling possibility that a cosmology rooted in multinaturalism is possible without a strict perspectival framework. Descola’s (2005, 2009) less controversial (and thus more widely applicable) reformulation of animism shares with perspectivism a general framing of the universality of (human) cultural spirituality in both humans and nonhumans, or a “sharing of humanity,” according to Turner (2009, 17). In a basic sense, this evokes multinaturalism, and suggests the concept is applicable independent of perspectivism.

A reasonable case could be made that the relatively extreme experiences of hunting and shamanic mediation in such a risk-laden natural and metaphysical environment render the Arctic “more Amazonian than Amazonia” in terms of its suitability for perspectival problem-framing and interpretation. (This is especially true when considering the emphasis within perspectivism on the hunter–prey relationship [see Viveiros de Castro 1998, 471]). Additionally, many Inuit myths detailing nonhuman animal origins describe developmental/evolutionary schemata mirroring Amazonian perspectival constructions (e.g., the various sea-woman myths on the origins of marine mammals). Knud Rasmussen (1931, 208) documented a characteristic early twentieth-century Netsilingmiut myth about the time before the ontological split between humans and nonhuman animals: “In the very first times...both people and animals lived on the earth, but there was no difference between them. They lived promiscuously: A person could become animal, and an animal could become a human being. There were wolves, bears, and foxes but as soon as they turned into humans they were all the same. They may have had different habits, but all spoke the same tongue, lived in the same kind of house, and spoke and hunted in the same way.”

Additionally, among Copper Inuit of the western Canadian Arctic, Rasmussen (1932, 35) describes similar beliefs rooted in (1) the past cultural and physical unity of humans and nonhumans, and (2) the permeability of these boundaries that was, in recent times, typically the purview of shamans: “In former times animals in human form were very common. Then they lived just

like men as long as they were in human form. In more recent times [Copper Inuit] only know of cases of wolves and wolverines having been met in human form by a shaman....I have seen shamans turn into wolves or polar bears.”

Among recent historic and modern Inuit, there exists a degree of flexibility in the interpretation and unfolding of interactions with nonhuman persons (somewhat similar to that observed by Willerslev among the Yukaghirs). Because of this, it is unlikely a “strict” Amazonian perspectivism is or was at play in pre-Christian Inuit beliefs, though they were likely underpinned by some form of multinaturalism in the distant past. A wide variety of oral myths suggest Inuit, nonhuman animals and a host of supernatural beings with ambiguous bodies are—at any given point—*persons* in the multinatural sense, though their physical personhood is transmutable. Thus, there is potential in every person for great physical diversity. Below, possible early traces of this belief structure, apparent in oral historical and ethnographic observations of Inuit shamanism and interspecies transformation, are presented and discussed.

## **Conjuring: Sound and movement as transformative tool among Inuit**

In many hunter-gatherer societies, ordinary people rely at least partly on shamans to learn about and interpret the spirit world and the nonhuman perspectives populating it. Though shamans were not the only premodern Inuit capable of transforming into other subject-positions, they were often the only persons with any significant degree of practical control over the transformative processes (see Paniaq 1997). Citing both ethnohistoric descriptions of, and recent discussions among Inuit about, shamanic abilities as being either “strong” or “weak” and fairly widespread, Laugrand and Oosten (2010, 34–35) have made the compelling suggestion that shamanism represents less a distinct role in Inuit society than a potentially universal ability for which individuals may have more or less talent. In this way, shamanism becomes yet another important but prosaic skill—like hunting and sewing.

This power could be transferred to non-shamans in multiple ways; for example, the keeping of amulets, which could consist of the skins or bones of certain nonhuman animals, was one way in which shamanic power, or spiritual “luck,” could be accessed by non-shamans (Lyon 1824, 367–68; Oosten 1997). Hill (2016) has made the convincing and welcome argument that scholarly investigations of Inuit spirituality should place more emphasis on the everyday activities of non-shamans (e.g., the wearing of amulets and the observation of taboos), as these comprised the vast majority of the pre-Christian supernatural interactions. She draws upon Jordan’s (2001) work among Siberian Khanty, positioning the activities of shamans as an important but dependent part of the human/nonhuman cosmological interaction sphere. This ecumenical view of supernatural agency is broadly valid; however, within pre-Christian Inuit society,

the position of the “strong” or (particularly) “powerful” shaman was unique not only because of her or his attendance to emergencies of poor health or resource scarcity, but also because of the innate ability to physically assume nonhuman perspectives and communicate with spirit interlocutors *at will*. In this way, the “professional” shaman within a group controlled human interaction with nonhumans at a far more fundamental level, thus, having great influence on group decision making.

Importantly, shamanic influence is neither abstract, nor conceptual; it effects real change in the world, and not merely in a metaphoric sense. Willerslev (2007, 138) argues that the relative compatibility of irreligious Soviet ideology and Yukaghir shamanic practice in Siberia was due to the fact that shamanism is not religion; instead, he argues, it is “a system of techniques intended to cause concrete things to happen.” While the gulf between communism and shamanism may have been navigable for Yukaghirs, the relationship between Inuit shamanism and Christianity was arguably more adversarial (see Laugrand 2002; Laugrand and Oosten 2010; Oosten and Laugrand 1999, 123–59). In the new spiritual order, shamans—always sensitive to public perceptions about their potency—found themselves increasingly marginalized by a growing affinity for the mystical machinations of Jesus Christ (Kappianaq 1993), described by missionaries as “the strongest and most powerful shaman” (Kappianaq 2000). This syncretism suggests belief in traditional shamanic power (if not the social positions of shamans) continued for some time after Christianization (see Laugrand and Oosten 2010; Oosten and Laugrand 2002; Laugrand, Oosten, and Trudel 2002; Saladin d’Anglure and Thérien 1997). Indeed, among many modern Inuit, pre-Christian beliefs and the language of shamanism endure. Over several years of fieldwork in the Foxe Basin region of Arctic Canada, I have heard numerous accounts from Inuit of usually nefarious *angakkuit* (shamans)—active in communities today—using their powers for greed or revenge. Accounts of benevolent shamans can be found as well (see Oosten and Laugrand 1999, 89–121). The ambiguity of shamanism in modern Inuit life is encapsulated well by Kugaaruk Elder Jose Angutinnurniq, whose uncle was a shaman and whose father may have had some mild shamanic abilities: “[Some Inuit] do not want to speak about angakkuit at all. I have often thought that if any of my relatives became sick, I could request the help of something unseen to heal them. I know that I can use both Christianity and what Inuit believed in the past. I believe in both and I am never going to stop doing so....I see them as one” (Oosten and Laugrand 2002, 62).

The authority of an individual shaman was at least partly predicated on her or his ability to assume other perspectives, often through transformation into one or more personal *tuurngait* (helping spirits). Shamans used these very real subjects to perform a large number of tasks, the most important being (1) determining the causes of physical illness and curing the sick, (2) scouting for resources, and (3) communing with nonhumans to determine the cause of



poor hunting luck or prey scarcity (see Laugrand, Oosten, and Trudel 2002; Oosten and Laugrand 1999, 2002; Saladin d'Anglure 2001). Unlike in the Amazonian world, where only a limited number of hunter-prey species seem to figure in the multinatural/perspectival framework (Viveiros de Castro 1998, 471), the entire animate and inanimate pantheon of beings seems to have been at the disposal of Inuit shamans, some of whom employed as *tuurngait* subjects as diverse as seaweed, water bugs (Kappianaq 1990), maggots, and even other human beings (Laugrand, Oosten, and Trudel 2002). This greater inclusiveness in the multinatural transactional sphere of the Arctic may be due to the relatively low biodiversity of the region, where it may have been easier to more fully integrate a smaller number of non-prey species into the broader cosmological system. Igloodik Elder George Kappianaq describes the relationship between recent historic Inuit shamans and their *tuurngait*: “When [a shaman’s *tuurngait*] is inside him he can see what is happening outside the perimeters that he is in. He can see others that do not suspect anything. He has the capacity to do that if he wants to check up on others, he knows what is happening to them without their knowledge that they are being watched. Once his spirit leaves him, then he becomes like any other people around him so that he cannot see anything except what is visible” (Kappianaq 2000).

Viveiros de Castro’s examples of perspectival transformation in Amazonia place great emphasis on “clothing” as outfitting for those assuming nonhuman perspectives (1998, 482). (The antiquity of this phenomenon is evidenced by deer cranial fragments interpreted as antler/frontlet headdresses recovered from Star Carr in North Yorkshire, England; these are the earliest known examples of what may be shamanic transformative ornamentation, at around 11 kya [Conneller 2004; Little et al. 2016]). Outward appearance was certainly an important component in pre-Christian Inuit transformation and assumption of animal characteristics (see Driscoll 1987; Fienup-Riordan 1996). All premodern Inuit were quite literally clothed—unambiguously—in the bodies of animals. Such constant interspecies immersion may have been one way in which non-shaman Inuit explicitly linked themselves to a cosmological world in which transformative, relational abilities were so important. Among multiple Canadian Arctic culture groups, there are both oral historical and firsthand accounts of *both* shamans and non-shamans transforming into other subjects through the donning and removal of clothing/skins associated with the otherly bodied. Examples of such sartorial transformation feature prominently in traditional myths told among Copper Inuit of the Coronation Gulf area, western Nunavut (see Rasmussen 1932, 193–98, 224–26, 230–32, 237–38). Both animal-skin clothing and amulets derived from, and evoking the traits of, nonhumans (Oosten 1997) comprise the Inuit “shamanistic toolkit” so crucial to the changing of subject-positions for both shamans and non-shamans alike.

Importantly, the process of assuming *tuurngait* and other nonhuman perspectives among Inuit shamans was often initiated by imitating not only the

physical appearance but also the *sounds* and *movements* of target subjects. Laugrand, Oosten, and Trudel (2002, 31, 34) provide a compelling narrative example of such conjuring from the South Baffin region, further noting that many of the names of the 347 *tuurngait* recorded in the region by Anglican missionary Reverend J. Peck in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries referenced movements and sounds, in addition to physical appearance. Kappianaq (2002) notes that in northern Foxe Basin, the initiation of shamanic transformation frequently involved crying out, either by mimicking the sounds of nonhuman animals, or by making sounds familiar only to the shaman and the subject whose perspective she or he wishes to assume:

If [a shaman] has a polar bear for a helping spirit, or a walrus, a bird, he can make the sound of these animals, depending which one he has for helping spirit. If this shaman has a departed [human] soul, from someone that had passed on, as a helping spirit this man has a tendency of crying out HA LA LA LA. This is if this man is in communion with someone that had passed away, he will sound with HA LA LA LA. If he has a bird for a helping spirit, for instance it may be a loon, it will sound URHU RHUU. It can use all the sound that this bird makes, this is when he is really into conjuring. In so doing, your inner self becomes full, and the sound has to come out of you.

Igloodik Elder Rachael Uyarasuk (1990) describes a pre-Christian ceremony known as *ipirsaq*—a public demonstration of shamanic transformation through mimicry of animal behaviour:

Shamans were harpooned and...pulled with the harpoon thong, and there would be number [sic] of men who would pull with all their might while the harpoon thong was pierced through the shaman who would pretend to be a walrus. While the shaman was pierced through the other end of the thong would be held by people indoors, sometimes the shaman was capable of dragging these men outdoors. When the shaman settled and no longer pulled, he would be brought indoors...[This was] done so that they could convince others that these individuals had the power beyond human capabilities.

This was a display not only of physical endurance, but also spiritual strength. By allowing herself or himself to be harpooned, the shaman assumes the subject-position of the walrus; it is strongly implied some transformation, or exchange of perspectives, takes place almost immediately, as no human would be capable of undergoing such an ordeal. (This seems also to imply that the physical limitations of the human body are determined by the spirit inhabiting it, as the shaman's superficially human form is retained throughout the ceremony.)

Recent historic references to similar displays can be found in accounts by Ludwig Kumlien (1879, 19) and Franz Boas ([1888] 1964, 184–85), among others.

Among Copper Inuit, Rasmussen (1932, 26) recounts a séance for summoning the Sea Woman herself, during which men in a *qaggi* (communal/dance house) attempted to hold down a shaman as he “writhed in pain, struck out with his fists and moaned incessantly.” A very early European reference to this type of display comes from Captain William Edward Parry of the British Royal Navy, who, along with Captain George Francis Lyon, spent the winter of 1821–22 at Winter Island—approximately 350 kilometres south of Igloolik. Parry (1824, 175) requested the local shaman Ewerat put on an impromptu spiritual performance: “After some little demur, he began to make his lips quiver, then moved his nose up and down, gradually closed his eyes, and increased the violence of his grimaces till every feature was hideously distorted; at the same time, he moved his head rapidly from side to side, uttering sometimes a snuffling sound, and at others a raving sort of cry.” In late April of the same year, Parry’s men were called by Iglulingmiut to the camp at Iglulik Pt. (today situated near the prominent archaeological sod-house camp NiHe-2) to attend to an Inuk suffering from a lung ailment. Inuit bystanders, realizing the man was being prepared for transport to the nearby navy ships, called for Ewerat, who by now was being referred to derisively by Parry’s crewmen as “the Conjuror.” The shaman proceeded to consult with his *tuurngaq*: he silently “held both his thumbs in his mouth” before “[uttering] variety of confused and inarticulate sounds” (Parry 1824, 216).

In his own journal of the Foxe Basin sojourn, Lyon (1824, 365–67) records his observations of Toolemak, an Iglulingmiut shaman whose body is taken over by a *tuurngaq*. In a completely darkened space, the shaman makes a variety of unusual sounds before answering questions posed by members of a rapt local audience. Such public ceremonies were apparently rare, which only contributed to their gravitas among Iglulingmiut (367). A similar ceremony is recorded in the same region a century later by Rasmussen (1929, 39); shaman Unaleq (or Inernerunashuaq), undergoes transformation well out of sight of spectators:

[Unaleq] required all the lamps to be put out, and crawled in under [Rasmussen’s] writing table. His wife carefully hung skins all round the table, so that her husband was now hidden from all profane glances. All was in darkness, we could only wait for what was to come. For a long time not a sound was heard, but the waiting only increased our anticipations. At last we heard a scraping of heavy claws and a deep growling... We could hear... sounds like those of trickling water, the rushing of wind, a stormy sea, the snuffling of walrus, the growling of bear... all through the peculiar lisp of the old shaman acting ventriloquist.

Likely inspired by the rich oral historical canon and *Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit* (“things long known to Inuit,” or specialized Inuit traditional knowledge), contemporary Inuit visual art abounds with imagery of human–nonhuman transformation or liminality (see Hessel 1998 and von Finckenstein 1999 among

others for examples). This modern proclivity is curiously rare in premodern Inuit art. In the following section, two such archaeological objects decorated with transformational imagery are presented. Both were recovered from Pingiqqalik (NgHd-1), a large archaeological site in northwest Foxe Basin, Nunavut, with more than one hundred recorded premodern Inuit sod house features (Desjardins 2017, 2018), and both are made of walrus ivory—a material with lasting significance in the region given the predominance of walruses in Foxe Basin waters and archaeological assemblages (see Desjardins 2013, 2018).

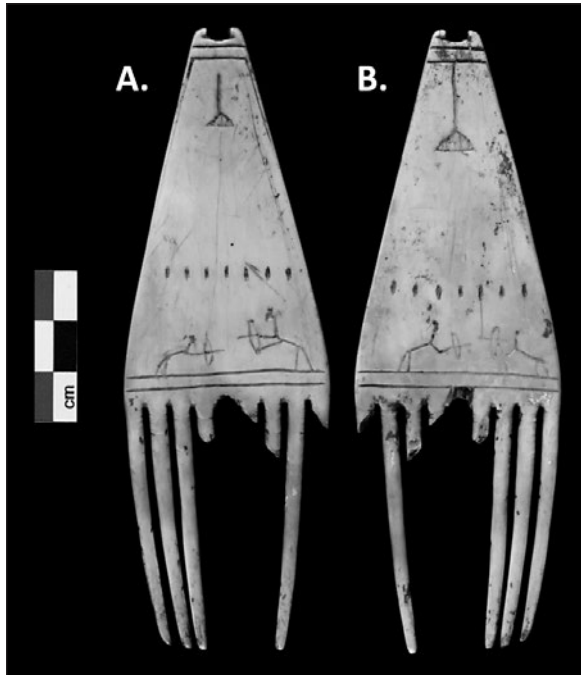
## **Transformational imagery in premodern Inuit material culture**

In contrast to often richly detailed Paleo-Inuit art (especially that of Late Dorset peoples, ca. AD 450 to 1300), premodern Inuit art is typically limited to simple designs and repeated accents (e.g., punctate dots, circles, lines with straight barbs, and the ubiquitous “Λ” motif) on otherwise functional tools, such as harpoon heads, bow drills, hair combs, needle cases, among other artifact types. Examples of such accents on premodern and historic Inuit artifacts are found in many classic Eastern Arctic archaeological texts, including Boas (1907) Mathiassen (1927a and 1927b), Taylor (1972), McCartney (1977), and McGhee (1984), among others. Many of these motifs are repeated in recent historic Inuit tattoos (see Boas [1888] 1964, 153; 1901, 108; 1907, 472–73; Mathiassen 1927a, 275; Rasmussen 1929, plate facing 32, 148; 1931, plates facing 312, 313).

More developed representative images or pictograms of humans, nonhuman animals, and various objects by Inuit are often etched simply with limited details. Premodern designs clearly depicting humans, nonhumans, or identifiable features or activities—including hunting—are far rarer, with clear examples from the Canadian Arctic in Boas (1901, 94, 107, 109, 113), Mathiassen (1927a, plate 29.2, plate 52.14, 72.5, plate 73.10, 185, 252, 260) McCartney (1980), Maxwell (1983; 1985, 268), and Whitridge (2013, 2016). Such art is somewhat more common in Alaska, with archaeological examples at Pt. Barrow (Mathiassen 1930, plate 7.11, 42) and Pt. Hope (1930, plate 16.7) among other sites.

### **The interspecies archers**

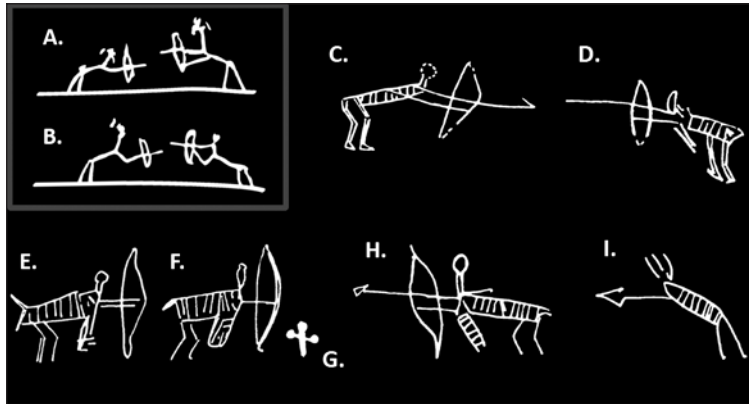
Figure 2 shows both faces of a hair comb recovered during excavations I led at Pingiqqalik in 2012. It is carved from a single, thin (between 2–2.5 mm), well-polished plate of ivory. Four of the eight tines are intact, providing a reliable estimate for the comb’s total length (approximately 12.5 cm). It was recovered 42 cm below surface in a 1x1m<sup>2</sup> test unit (T1TU5) situated near the converging/shared entrance passage of two large, overlapping sod house features; a single radiocarbon date from caribou bone in the same unit (at 95.5 cm below surface) dated to cal. AD 1532 ± 84 (2-sigma), 385 ± 15 <sup>14</sup>C age (UCIAMS 129054) (Desjardins 2018).



**Figure 2.** Both faces (A and B) of a decorated Inuit ivory comb from Pingiqqalik, northwest Foxe Basin, Nunavut.

The deeply etched design immediately above the tines shows two persons facing one another in either battle or play. (The continuity of the decorative motifs at the middle and top of both faces suggests the actors are interacting directly with one another, rather than occupying self-contained spaces of their own, as in logographic imagery; whether the markings on sides A and B represent a repeated scene, a continuity of action or two altogether separate [albeit, similar] scenes featuring different actors is unclear.) All four incised persons are clearly archers, and all have longer bodies and necks than is typically seen in representational Inuit renderings of human beings, which tend to feature round heads and shorter necks. The stances of the archers are also notable, as all appear to be standing upright, though leaning forward at an unnatural angle.

The shapes and postures of the Pingiqqalik figures is distinct from those of the archers on another example of representational precontact Inuit art—the bow drill recovered from PgHp-1, near Arctic Bay (Ikpiarjuk), northern Baffin Island (Maxwell 1983) (Figure 3). All persons on this object appear to be leaning forward; however, archers 3C, 3D, 3E, 3F, and 3H from Arctic Bay appear to have bent knees, indicating they are kneeling (see Figure 4 for an ethnographic depiction of this stance). Also noteworthy are the accouterments hanging in front of 3D, 3E, 3F, and 3H; these may represent quivers (though these would typically



**Figure 3.** Detail of representational images from the Pingiqqalik comb (A, B) and the bow drill from PgHp-1 (C to I), near Arctic Bay (*Ikpiarjuk*), Nunavut.

be expected to rest on the backs or sides) or—as suggested by Peter Whitridge (pers. comm., 2018)—a protective covering or armor, indicating the archers are in conflict. (The meaning of the deeply incised cross labelled 3G is unclear.)

The most unusual person depicted on the Arctic Bay drill is 3I, who appears to be holding a lance, or merely directing action. This person has straightened legs and, like the Pingiqqalik archers, appears to be standing upright, though in a distinctly nonhuman manner (see Figure 5 for an example of a standing Inuit archery stance). Most intriguingly, the archers in 3A, 3B, and 3I have animal-like features, despite engaging in human activities. Both Pingiqqalik archers in Figure 3A have elongated lower faces (or muzzles); similarly, both figures in Figure 3A and the left archer in 3B appear to have antlers. Instead of a round head, person 3I on the bow drill has antler-like protrusions. Maxwell (1983, 80) suggested archers 3E, 3F, and 3H may be caribou hunters disguised as their prey (evidenced by “tails” on their clothing). Still, these persons have rounded heads and bent knees, likely making them physically human. For the archers in 3A and 3B and the individual 3I, the nonhuman animal attributes cannot be so easily dismissed as disguises. Instead, a reasonable interpretation is that 3I, as well as 3A and 3B on the Pingiqqalik comb, represent beings in a liminal interspecies (human–caribou) state, either in the process of transforming from one form to the other, or fully transformed, and exhibiting human cultural traits.

Above the archers on each side of the Pingiqqalik comb are incised seven relatively deep punctate marks, and above these is a variation on the inverted “A” decorative motif. The origins of this ubiquitous motif—adorning both artifacts and human skin (as tattoo patterns)—are unclear, though it likely had multiple meanings across space and over time. There is no shortage of reasonable interpretations. Mathiassen believed the simple two-pronged design to be a

derivation of a three-pronged Alaskan variant (𐀀) (see Mathiassen 1927b, 120–25; 1930, 82). (This “early” motif continues into relatively recent times; at Pingiqqalik, an ivory Thule Type 3 harpoon head with bifacially etched incisions above the line hole was recovered from 98 cm below surface at T1TU5—the same unit from which the comb was recovered.) Discussions between Martin Appelt of the National Museum of Denmark and an informant from Greenland have led the former to believe both forms represented bird or mammal claws (Appelt, pers. comm., 2018). Alternately, Peter Whitridge (pers. comm., 2018) has suggested the two-pronged motif may have been meant to evoke a whale fluke. Of particular interest on the Pingiqqalik comb is that the 𐀀 incision is modified in an unusual way—the two prongs are closed, and what appear to be vertical incisions are present within the enclosed space. This “broom” design is quite rare; I am aware of only other example—minus the vertical incisions—documented by Boas (1907, 473) in the form of an upper-arm tattoo design from the Aivilingmiut region.

Hair combs—typically of ivory—are relatively common items in Inuit archaeological assemblages, and they continued to be used into relatively recent times. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, decorated combs were in use among Iglulingmiut of northern Foxe Basin (Parry 1824, 214, 494, plate facing 548), as well as both Netsilingmiut of the central Arctic and Aivilingmiut of the western coast of Hudson Bay (Boas 1901, 107–08; 1907, 414–17). Many Inuit combs are decorated with either representational imagery or accent designs (Mathiassen 1927b, 113–15). Their large handles offer a particularly apposite palette for the etching of representational imagery. Three of Mathiassen’s (1927a) few early finds of such Inuit art from the central Eastern Arctic are etched onto hair combs. At the Classic Thule Inuit “type-site” Naujan (MdHs-1), near present-day Naujaat (Repulse Bay), he recovered an ivory comb with a clear etching of a caribou on one handle face (1927a, plate 29.2). Similarly, at Qilalukan (PeFs-1) on the north coast of Baffin Island, he found a heavily degraded comb of narwhal tusk with remarkable etchings on both handle faces: one featuring a manned *qajaq*, and the other, a manned *umiak* (1927a, plate 52.14).

At the Kuk site group (LjHp-2, 3, and 4) on northern Southampton Island, Mathiassen recovered another ivory comb: this one with two tents etched on one side, and two caribou facing one another on the other. Notably, each side of this last comb had three 𐀀 accent designs etched in a row above each representational image set (1927a, plate 73.10, 260). Another notable example of a likely historic Inuit comb with representational imagery is provided by Boas (1907, 417)—a drawing of an Aivilingmiut comb (likely of ivory) from the western Hudson Bay area. This specimen has a lashing hole, punctate edge accents on the handle end, and a clear etching of a human—clothed in a parka—and a dog on one face, and a radial punctate pattern on the opposite face.



**Figure 4.** “Bowman of Pelly Bay” (Rasmussen 1931, plate facing 76).



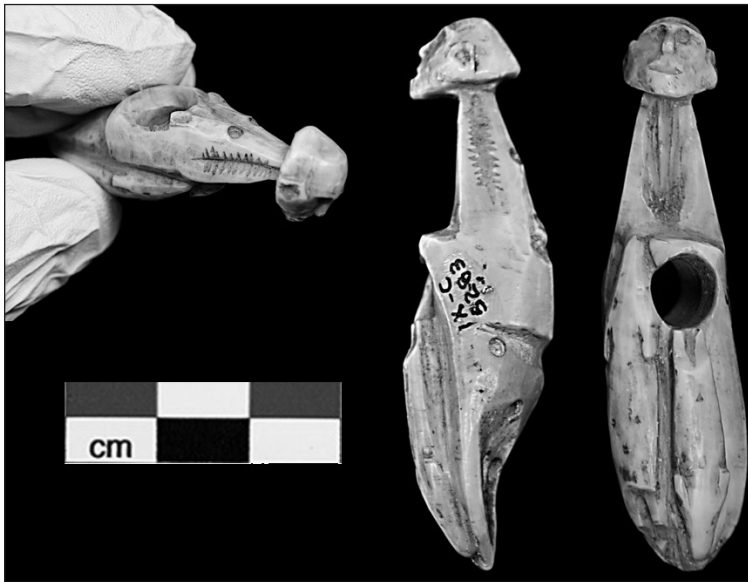
**Figure 5.** “Target practice with bow and arrow” (Rasmussen 1930, plate facing 104).

### **The multi-/interspecies “fastener”**

In the summer of 1949, British archaeologist Graham Rowley (1950, 63) was given by Iglulingmiut informants an anomalous artifact with both Paleo and Inuit attributes recovered from “some old houses” (presumably Thule Inuit winter houses) at Pingiqqalik. In May 2017 I examined the object (IX-C: 5283) at the Canadian Museum of History in Ottawa, Canada, where it is currently held. Carved from the tooth of an adult walrus, the artifact features multiple



three-dimensional animal forms, and a large central line hole (Figure 6). The “swimming” seals at the lower half of the tooth are similar in form to those seen elsewhere in Paleo-Inuit art from Greenland, Newfoundland, and Nunavut, including at Alarniq (NhHd-1), approximately twelve kilometres north of Pingiqqalik (see Hardenberg 2013, 12, 14–16). The human head at one extreme end of the object is somewhat distinct in style from the human crania typically seen in Dorset art; particularly unusual are the well-defined eyes and ears.



**Figure 6.** An ivory Paleo- and Inuit toggle-like artifact (IX-C: 5283), Pingiqqalik. Photograph by the author, courtesy of the Canadian Museum of History.

The head merging with the human head may belong to a canid or a bear. Rowley (1950, 64) identified the animal as a fox. Bear imagery is far more common than that of foxes or wolves in Dorset art. The gouged underside of the animal’s head (doubling as the throat of the human) is seen in a number of Dorset bear representations from across the Arctic, including around northern Foxe Basin (Hardenberg 2013, 1, 3–7). The elongated ears indicate the animal is a canid, as the ears of Dorset bear figures are typically markedly smaller (Hardenberg-Kleist, pers. comm., 2017). Further, the animal’s mouth and teeth—demarcated by a single, deep incision, with several short, perpendicular marks in a herringbone pattern, and doubling as a spinal column for the human figure when viewed in profile—appear more detailed than the simple incisions of bear teeth commonly seen in Dorset art.

Rowley (1950, 63–64) notes that the object resembles “a toy [bowhead] whale” when seen in profile. This is a compelling interpretation, given the

significance of bowheads to the pantheon of agents in Inuit cosmology and art (see Laugrand and Oosten 2015), as whales are rarely depicted in Paleo-Inuit art. If the depiction were intentional, the form of the animal would have been foremost in the minds of the carver(s). I believe whale form was more likely a serendipitous (for Inuit) coincidence, facilitated by the shape of the walrus tooth's crown. The seals and canid/bear are of a distinctly Paleo-Inuit style, while the head is somewhat stylistically ambiguous. (Though the figure's eyes are partly drilled, Rowley suggests drilling was the result of Neo-Inuit retouch.) The drilled line hole, in addition to several other partial drilling marks, imply Inuit modification. Rowley (1950, 64–65) concludes that the object was originally Paleo-Inuit “with no particular purpose,” was found by later Inuit occupants of the site, and eventually repurposed as a toggle or belt-fastener. How much actual use to which the relatively fragile object was subject is unclear, as it is in excellent condition—very well preserved, with good colour and no major cracking or sun bleaching that would indicate long-term surface exposure.

Paleo-Inuit objects with multiple animal figures carved upon them are not unheard of; LeMoine, Helmer, and Hanna (1995, 45–46, Fig. 4b) describe a remarkable ivory “shaman’s tube”—an object presumed to be of spiritual significance from the Paleo-Inuit site QjJx-1 on Little Cornwallis Island in the Canadian High Arctic. Like the Pingiqqalik fastener, the tube features a variety of persons melding into one another—a seal or human face, walrus flippers, and seal flippers—all carved into a single cylindrical piece of ivory. One may dismiss the multiple images on the fastener as a palimpsest with no original, all-encompassing meaning. I argue the item is important, in part, *because* of its complicated provenance; it was used and modified by peoples from two entirely separate culture groups, each with its own cosmological point of view. What is clear is that Inuit *completed* the object, and its final form was ultimately appreciated by Inuit as it appears today: multiple bodily forms—both human and nonhuman—transitioning from one form to another. Whatever its meaning for premodern Paleo- and Neo-Inuit, it likely provoked significant interpretation and thought among both groups.

## Discussion

Both artifacts from Pingiqqalik provide compelling evidence for depictions of interspecies transformation. The archers on the comb differ significantly enough from all but one of the archers represented on the Arctic Bay bow drill to indicate they are in some sense nonhuman. Their actions, however—engaging one another in combat or play—are distinctly culturally human. The individuals may represent dueling shamans or their helping spirits; some of the recent historic South Baffin *tuurngait* recorded by Peck were known to be armed with bows and arrows (Laugrand, Oosten, and Trudel 2002, 36–37). Whether the Pingiqqalik figures represent were caribou or humans in transition, their

behaviour is in keeping with a multinaturalist view of the centrality of human culture. Interpretation of the fastener is complicated by the fact that it is the product of two cultures, both of which must have appreciated its implications for interspecies transformation or closeness. I have stressed previously that shamanic activity—and, by extension, imagery in shamanic belief systems—is not merely symbolic, but is usually literal, and meant to exert real change in the world. Given this, what practical purpose might these objects have had, and what mental images were they meant to elicit?

Betts, Hardenberg, and Stirling (2015, 100) have suggested that a nonhuman effigy can be perspectival in the sense that it can represent “an indexical category that signifies the physicality, perceptions, and capabilities of the animal as well as its relationships with the world and other beings.” In terms of functionality, they suggest polar bear effigies may have been used by Dorset Paleo-Inuit to “channel” the perspectives (and natural hunting abilities) of the species (100–01). In this sense, like shamanic outfitting or the mimicry of animal sounds and movements, transformational images may have served as perspectival instruments. Hill (2018) has emphasized the importance of perspectival sight in her interpretation of the ivory-eyed loon from the Ipiutak burial. Similarly, Weismantel (2015) has suggested interspecies imagery allows viewers to assume the perspective of a shaman—important, as only shamanic sight can distinguish between worlds (the subject would appear fully human to any non-shaman viewer, regardless of her or his species). Such depictions would have been the only means of viewing the world in this fantastic way.

## Conclusion

In examining premodern Inuit imagery and descriptions of human–animal transformation, I have attempted to use Amerindian perspectivism and one of its dependent components (multinaturalism) to shed further light on Inuit–animal relationships in Arctic. While further interpretive work remains to be carried out on Inuit material culture from outside Foxe Basin, the imagery on the artifacts from Pingiqqalik is compelling evidence of the multinatural fluidity of bodily forms across species. Additionally, oral historical accounts and ethnohistoric observations indicate strongly that among Pre-Christian Inuit, a multinatural—if not strictly perspectival—worldview appears to have underpinned the ways in which all beings understood their positions in relations to those around them.

Though physical fluidity and interspecies transformation was not limited to shamans, I believe shamans—as cosmological specialists—were uniquely positioned within Inuit society to both set and interpret spiritual rules, as well as to serve as examples of how to interact with nonhuman persons effectively—just as an expert hunter can inspire or teach a novice. The multinaturalism underpinning the pre-Christian Inuit cosmological world may have provided non-shamans a sense of “structural security,” the knowledge that they could

know the rules and mechanics of the fantastic supernatural environment negotiated so confidently by shamans. It is likely the viewing of, or participation in, shamanic performances/transformations; artistic representations in material culture; and the oral transmission of myths relating to human-nonhuman relationships all served to reify and assuage the uncertainty of living in a dynamic and precarious environment.

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