

Krivitoq: Inuit suicide.

When krivitoq occurs, everyone knows what has taken place, but it is impolite or unlucky to talk about it openly. For friends and family, it is a burden borne silently.

In the old days, if a hunter had been rejected in love or disgraced in some way, he would voluntarily leave the settlement and withdraw to the hills and live a solitary life, avoiding all contact with other hunters. From time to time he would reveal himself at a distance, just to indicate that he was entirely capable as a hunter and had rejected them rather than the other way about (perhaps in equal measure to the hurt he felt). In such a case he would eventually die; his will to live dissipated through a lack of social contact and a life lived without purpose. Interestingly, he would not travel to join another tribe, his connection to his own group remaining to the end. This scenario was more common on the west coast, as it offered good hunting inland. The east coast was different, and the practice of krivitoq was more related to the sea environment which governed most of life there.

In Ammassalik, during the post-Danish age (especially in recent years), men disappeared ostensibly while out hunting in the sea ice. Some genuinely do get caught out and get swept away by strong tidal streams and rapid ice congestion. And on occasions, some make it home again; there are good stories of men who have arrived back long after being given up for dead, much to the surprise of the settlement, and are feted as heroes of the highest valour. But often someone, not even a hunter, just goes off in a boat (not always their own) after a drinking spree and everyone knows what has happened. No one goes looking as they know the person does not wish to be found. This form of depression is often most noticeable at the end of winter, just as spring starts. Perhaps it's something to do with the sense of hopelessness; that the new year's sun is reminding them that life is meaningless. Or perhaps it is biological, linked to our Seasonal Adjustment Syndrome (SAD). Who knows?

In recent times, it has more often been the younger ones who commit suicide. They used to prefer a gun, placed just under the chin, but too many were unsuccessful and were left with only half a jaw. These days they prefer hanging, which always works. Instead of heading off to sea, the older ones tend to drink themselves into oblivion. Unfortunately, being naturally gregarious, they do it in public. Apparently their physical makeup, like the Australian aborigines, does not give them a strong resistance to alcohol. In terms of the cost to the community, it is triply destructive: firstly because the person is drunk during the day and unavailable for work of any description; secondly because his demise reflects negatively on his family and on his standing as a man; and thirdly because his drunkenness often results in physical and emotional violence to his family, predisposing them to follow his example. The antics of drunks in the town square; older men who otherwise would be expected to set a positive example, creates negative theatre to prompt anxiety in all who witness it. In addition to alcohol, drugs have taken their place as poison of choice. Greenland was, or perhaps still is, a major staging post for the worldwide movement of drugs and Greenlanders have increasing contact with Europe through Denmark.

In time, all this will change as people find a meaningful place in the new world.