Canadian Inuit Art and Coops: 
Father Steinmann of Povungnituk

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The key role of missionaries in the demise, modification, or commoditization of Native art is a surprisingly neglected topic in the current surge of research on contact arts, colonial transformations, and hybridity. This paper focuses on the role that Father A. P. Steinmann O.M.I. (L'Ordre de Marie Immaculée, also known as Oblate Fathers, played in the creation of the Povungnituk Sculptures Society and eventually in the formation of La Fédération des Coopératives du Nouveau Québec.

The editors of this collection are quite correct in suggesting that missionaries, dedicated to replacing indigenous beliefs systems with their own, nevertheless often became collectors, conservators, and instigators of Native arts. It is of considerable importance to understand that missionaries, generally, were and are a more educated lot than the majority of colonial agents and are therefore more likely to appreciate artistic skills and creativity than, for instance, traders, police, carpenters, and sailors. In addition, from my experience, missionaries with long experience in one field area are likely to develop a respect and even a protective attitude towards "their" Natives, quite apart from their religious activities.

The Child is Father of the Man

Father André Pierre Marie Steinmann was a most extraordinary character according to the accounts of all who knew him, Native or white, and was known as Umkallak (= the short, cute beard) among the Inuit since his arrival in the Canadian North as a young missionary (fig. 1). He was also known as Le Petite Barbe, Andy, Father, Le Père Steinmann, or as one third of the trio "POV" (the ab-breivation for Povungnituk and also a joking reference to Pat Furneaux, the Oblate Father, and Vo Furneaux, the trio who, along with Pete Murdock, directed the singular course of events in Povungnituk in the crucial years of 1960-1969).

The little Steinmann was born in Nancy, France in 1912, the third of seven boys in a middle class family. He was distanced from his severe German-born paternal grandfather because his parents had refused him shelter during World War I. On the other hand, he was very close to his French maternal grandfather, who was a career officer, great storyteller, and a pious man, president of the Conference de St. Vincent de Paul. When his father went to the front, his mother moved the family to Paris during the war, and from 1921 on they all lived there.

The boy André did not have an uneventful youth. He recounted that even before his mother died when he was 13, he had been sexually initiated by his friends and "une cousine" and was subsequently thrown out of the house. His father then married the house maid, and various quarrels ensued in the family. André was expelled from school in 1927 and again in 1929. Finally, his father made him join the Boy Scouts, and he became quite happy, with heroes such as Charles Lindbergh, and later performing as a successful clown and magician. Both a friend and one brother joined the priesthood, and when the latter gave him the adventure story L'Épopée Blanche [The White Epic], he decided to become a missionary to the Esquimauds (see map).

The Missionary

He entered the Oblate Order in 1932 at the age of 21. In spite of difficulty getting used to the life
and the habits, and a year of military service in 1934, he stuck with it and was ordained along with his brother Jean at Notre Dame de Paris in 1937. In June 1938, he set sail from Marseilles, along with Father Mascaret (later named by the Inuit, Kayuk = the light-brown [haired] one), and they arrived by rail in Montreal from Texas via Chicago. There he met Bishop of the Arctic Turquetil, and two days later set sail north to Wakeham Bay (known as Kangirsuujak to the Inuit, and later as Maricourt by the Quebequois) where he replaced Father Cartier who was sent to Iivujivik. The other whites there consisted of a Catholic lay brother Eugene Fafard and Leo Manning who, unusually for a Hudson Bay Company trader, was also a Catholic.

In the summer of 1940, Father Steinmann was named head priest at Wakeham Bay, assisted by Father Mascaret. Because of the war, the Hudson Bay trading post was closed and supply ships were infrequent, throwing the priests to rely on their own hunting skills and on the Inuit. They both became good hunters and sled men; they continued to learn English and Inuit, and occupied themselves as doctors, gynecologists, dentists, and teachers. What is fairly clear is that Father Steinmann never claimed to have made any converts of the Inuit population. Since the turn of the century, the Inuit of this area in the Eastern Arctic had been nominally converted to the Anglican faith by the Reverends Peck, Stewart, and others (Graburn 1969: 120-23). Later Father Mascaret, however, did manage to convert about 30-40 people in Wakeham Bay, amounting to half the village, which thereby had to become endogamous and which followed Father Mascaret when he was appointed to another village parish.

After the war, the Inuit continued in relative poverty as stores were poorly stocked and prices for pelts were low. The Oblate Fathers decided to found missions at other Hudson Strait villages, including
Sugluk (Salluit) and Koartak (Quartaq), and later Povungnituk (Puvirnituq) on the Hudson Bay. Father Steinmann traveled throughout the area, and in the early 1950s, he was allowed to go back to France, and to visit Rome. From 1953-55 he was stationed in the Central Arctic, West of the Hudson Bay. He traveled back to Ungava in 1955, meeting the Anglican Bishop and missionary on board ship, and he helped build the mission at Sugluk with Father Verspeek OMI (named Tunusuituk). He arranged for abandoned building materials from Cape Wostenholme near Ivvijivik, to be shipped to Povungnituk, where he founded the Catholic mission in 1956. Very soon, he opened a school of 80 Inuit children, and became “doctor” and “dentist” for the village.

**Povungnituk**

Povungnituk is the village fourteen miles inland up the broad Povungnituk River. It was founded by the Hudson Bay Company in 1956, when it moved its post from “Old POV” on the coast some twenty miles to the south and closed its smaller post at Cape Smith 100 miles to the North (Vallee 1967: 2-3). By 1962, the Inuit inhabitants of the hunting and trapping camps from the north and the south had all gradually settled more or less permanently in the growing village of white agencies. Since WWII, the trapping based money economy had never really regained health, and Inuit needs for income were satisfied increasingly by welfare and pension payments and by the growing handicraft industry (Graburn 1969: 139-166).

POV had been one of the two areas visited by the entrepreneurial artist James Houston in 1948 and 1949, which resulted in the birth of the soapstone carving industry (Graburn 1987; Houston 1951; Martijn 1964). At first, the “art industry” was partly subsidized by the Federal Government, which was concerned about the meagre returns
from Inuit trapping. The pieces were exported through the Hudson Bay Company and retailed by them and by the Canadian Handicrafts Guild (Goetz 1993; Mitchell 1993). In the village of Port Harrison (now Inuljuak), 50 miles to the south, and at POV, Houston met men who had been used to making small ivory souvenirs for sailors and traders. Occasionally they made similar figurines from soapstone, the soft stone normally used for quillik (oil-burning lamps) and uksiq (cooking pots), which were going out of use at that time. Houston showed them his own art sketches, sometimes swapping them for sculptures, encouraging them to produce more art for sale. Quipirngvaluak and other men, then young, eagerly participated, and in the late 1980s and early 1990s a few Inuit in that region still remembered Houston’s visits. By 1950, a scheme was set up whereby the Federal Government lent credit to Hudson Bay stores for the purchase of sculptures, which were shipped south and sold by the Company and by the Canadian Handicraft Guild. Supply soon exceeded demand, and for the next two decades new channels of export and sale were tried.

After 1960 the number of international, governmental, and private efforts to increase the demand stimulated further outside subsidy in money and in kind. Father Steinmann turned out to be one of the key people in this national Canadian effort.

The Sculptors Association

Father Steinmann had established the Catholic mission on Povungnituk in 1956 when the Company moved to the new POV. The trader in charge of the post was Pete Murdock (Pitaaq), who established a new kind of social unit for trade purposes (Balikci 1959). Unlike everywhere else in the north, he set up “camp accounts,” collective mechanisms by which the members of a kinship based, cooperative, often boat-owning, residential group, a “camp” (sometimes known as a band) could have an account into which everyone could deposit. However, the money had to accumulate until some target was reached and collective decision was made to purchase something large, for instance a Peterhead Boat (a 5-10 man wooden hunting boat with inboard motor, functionally equivalent to an umiak).

In some ways, these joint accounts became the forerunner of the Inuit cooperatives. Vallee states, “The norms of pooling efforts implied in the carver’s association were combined with those of pooling re-


sources at the camp level implied in the camp accounts system, established by the Hudson’s Bay Company trader [Peter Murdock], to provide a normative basis for the new cooperative” (1967: 20).

The winter of 1957-58 was a particularly bad year, with the Inuit getting little country food to eat and few foxes to sell. In addition, the price paid to them for their soapstone sculptures remained low and stagnant, and even the Hudson Bay Company (at that time the only outlet) had to stop buying at times as the inventory filled their warehouses. Father Steinmann was determined to help the complaining Inuit and thought of ways to increase the carvers’ income, through raising the quality of the artistic products and through increasing demand in the South. He placed a phone call - through a single-side band radio, quite difficult in those days - to Robert D. Cowen, president of the Monongahela and Ohio Coal Company in Cleveland and asked for his help. Mr. Cowen and his wealthy friends had been flying round the Eastern Arctic in private planes in 1949 when they were grounded in Quartaq. Father Steinmann had housed them and looked after them for four days, and in gratitude, Mr. Cowen, with whom he kept up a correspondence, had said that if he ever needed help he should
gather at the mission every Saturday with their week’s output of sculptures, instead of taking them straight to the H. B. Co. and accepting whatever the given price determined by the clerk or the manager. They put their carvings on the table and examined them closely. Then they each wrote the price on a piece of paper and handed it to Steinmann who determined the average price. This was to be the price that the artist would ask for their carving. They also critiqued each other’s works, something they were at first reluctant to do. But encouraged by Father Steinmann they developed this practice, realizing how it would help their livelihood. Charlie and other experienced carvers soon became able to “price” and to critique their pieces quite quickly. These pieces were packed and shipped, at first by ship, and the artists received part of their return only at a much later date. If other artists wished to join this elite group, they had to submit their carvings for collective judgment.

It was during this period that Povungnituk art raised its reputation in the outside world. At first, when Houston had visited the area in 1949 and 1950, Povungnituk became famous for its “newly discovered art forms,” along with Port Harrison. But by 1953, the formerly roving crafts officer, James Houston, settled as permanent advisor and Northern Service Officer for the Federal Government in Cape Dorset on Baffin Island (Graburn 1987). The custom of making commercial sculptures had spread (via Houston and other government efforts) to other communities and the emerging “big four” were Port Harrison, Povungnituk, Sugluk, and Cape Dorset, all of which sold their art to the Hudson Bay Company. However, the Hudson Bay Company was reluctant to carry excess inventory and many times said the market was flooded or the folk art fad had peaked. Under those circumstances, the government officials often bought art for shipment using funds from their welfare budgets, saying it was better for the Inuit to earn their livelihood than to exist on handouts.

The same year that Povungnituk made a splash in the U.S.A., Cape Dorset became even more famous for exhibiting at Stratford, Ontario, the first of its annual series of soapstone block and sealskin stencil prints, another new art form that Houston had encouraged. Thus, at least in Father Steinmann’s mind, a direct rivalry with Cape Dorset emerged. The Povungnituk Sculptors could

call upon him (Fleck 1969: 39-40). Mr. Cowen sent him two round trip airfares to Cleveland and Father Steinmann flew off with Charlie Sivuarapik (a very good artist and senior male in an old Povungnituk family) some finished sculptures, tools and some soapstone. They were a hit. Mr. Cowen and friends bought or ordered carvings. Steinmann was put in touch with stores and galleries, and renting a station wagon, he set off with Charlie from Cleveland to meet other contacts “a Cleveland, Detroit, Pittsburgh, New York et Toronto” as he wrote in his Curriculum Vitae. He returned with over $3,000 in orders - probably $30-50,000 at today’s prices - and the determination to parlay this event into a permanent means of supporting Inuit.

Back in Povungnituk, he called together a group of the better sculptors, headed by Charlie Sivuarapik, and suggested a new organization, which he called the Sculptors Society of Povungnituk. The group of ten (male) Inuit would

not very well rely solely on their friends in the U.S.A. for a market while competing with the Hudson Bay Co. and the Ottawa-government sponsored Houston. Father Steinmann was determined to make the Society into a producers' cooperative, as was being arranged in Cape Dorset. They filed papers, and indeed, the cooperative was officially born in early 1960.

Before going on to describe the even larger efforts of the cooperative and the federation of coops which eventually emerged, let us consider for a moment any influences that Steinmann may have had on the arts being produced by the Povungnituk. Father Steinmann was a realist rather than an idealist. He did not try to impose any particular art style or even “primitivity” itself (as did Houston and some other art advisors). He encouraged fine workmanship and balanced proportions, and he had two of the finest carvers, Charlie Shiuvariapik and Aisa Qupirgualuk, in the group; he also discouraged anything that had too small a base or would be too delicate in the soft stone for packaging and shipping. But this advice was a little different from that of the H. B. Co. personnel.

Across the north, most Inuit were used to portraying Arctic fauna and traditional Inuit activities, such as hunting and housekeeping, in their arts. Father Steinmann encouraged the direct portrayal of Inuit mythology, as well as the unadorned portrayal of nudity, scatology, and so on (figs. 2 and 3). We can see from the notes on his childhood above that this was in character; indeed, he was said to have owned “the best examples of erotic Eskimos carvings to be found in the world” (Fleck 1969: 40) and, I might add, informally speaking his favorite word was “troup de loup.” Both the mythology and the nudity he knew would appeal to most middle class audiences.

But also these were things that had been forbidden by the Anglican Church to which all the Eastern Arctic Inuit belonged. The Anglicans had systematically repressed the public expression of traditional mythology in their successful attempt to convert all Eastern Arctic Inuit and wean them away from shamanism and animism. So he was expressing his rivalry with the Anglicans by encouraging the Inuit to break their recently learned prudish taboos. For instance, when I saw a devout Anglican Inuit artist portraying an unclothed version of the sea goddess (Nuliajuak, sometimes mistakenly called Sedna) I asked him why he didn’t put in the nipples; he replied that they were “doctor’s things.” I think that the Inuit of Povungnituk were pleased to be able to express publicly the kind of things they joked about privately, and, for a while, their expressions of nudity were very “Inuit” and very different from Playboy images.

Steinmann encouraged the retelling of ancient stories and particularly encouraged Charlie Shiuvariapik and famed storyteller Davidialuk Alasuak to illustrate some of them with multiple images. So his cramped mission quarters were crowded with imposing mythological carvings and humorous nudes, both for his own enjoyment and to show to the numerous white visitors, all of whom would have to pay a call on him. Among these visitors was the anthropologist Dr. Asen Balikci, whose
early paper on Povungnituk (1959) was a classic. While Balikey was there in 1958, he commissioned and bought numerous sculptures from members of the sculptor’s society for his employer, the National Museum of Canada. Later another anthropologist, Eugene Arima, was sent to Povungnituk to “get the stories” on these museum specimens. Arima, working with the young Inuit man Zebedie Nungak (now president of the Makkivik Corporation of the James Bay Land Claims settlement, see below), interviewed the makers while showing them photographs, and these “myths” (some incomplete, some recent tales) were published (in English/Inuit Syllabics and French/Roman orthography-Eskimo editions) along with the photographs in the best-selling book Unikkaatuat/Eskimo Stories (1969). This, of course, garnered more fame for Povungnituk art.

Later, anthropologist Bernard Saladin d’Anglure published the artistic biography of the sculptor Davidialuk Amittuk as La parole changée en pierre (1978). Davidialuk, the most prolific producer of “pre-Christian images” in Nungak and Arima’s book, was brought up as the stepson of Juanas Qirmuajauk, the most famous “storyteller” of the region. He was happy to have Father Steinmann’s encouragement to render visible both the mythological beliefs and the historically true stories that he knew, often writing the story of the event or person on the bottom of the base in inuititut syllabics. Because of his vast superior knowledge of the old ways, his personal aloofness, and his relative
disdain of either of the Christian sects, Davidi was sometimes feared as shaman by other Inuit (fig. 4).

The rivalry with Houston and Cape Dorset grew more intense. Whether this had anything to do with hostility against Protestants, Anglophones, or the Federal Government, at a time when Quebec nationalism was getting underway, I do not know, but Steinmann certainly became quite ecumenical in his later years.

Through connections unknown to me, Charlie Shivuarapik was awarded membership in the Sculptors Society of Canada, before any of Cape Dorset's famous artists. Steinmann used his Francophone connections to strengthen the co-op, particularly through association with Caisse Populaire Desjardins of the province, a socially minded federation of credit unions, which lent the co-op money for inventory, and which opened a branch in Puvungnituk, inside the co-op with Father Steinmann as manager.

The next step in the rivalry was Father Steinmann's effort to establish a print-making program as successful as the increasingly famous Cape Dorset program. In 1960 the co-op hired an art advisor, Gordon Yearsley, who attempted to adapt for Inuit use various methods such as wax print blocks different from those Houston had introduced at Cape Dorset. This was not a commercial success; he did not get along with Steinmann, and within the year he left. Another advisor, Victor Tinkl, was hired in 1962-63, making a greater impression on the Inuit, training some in the cutting and printing from soapstone print blocks. The system taught at Puvungnituk was the European tradition in which the artist cuts his or her own block and someone else prints it. In opposition, Cape Dorset uses the Japanese system (Houston had training in Japan) in which the artist draws the design on paper and, if chosen, transfers it onto a print block to be printed by specialists. Thus, both Cape Dorset and POV had prints shops with specialist block printers, but the crucial difference was that in POV all the artists cut their own blocks, and produced relatively few of them. Thus a high proportion (maybe one in ten) was actually printed for the annual collection, whereas in Cape Dorset only one in a hundred or so drawings was cut onto a block and printed (fig. 5).

The Cape Dorset annual editions had been produced, with a catalogue, since 1960, and in 1963 Puvungnituk decided to try to use the same system.

The Department of Northern Affairs had appointed an "Eskimo Arts Council" (Gustavison 1994) of prestigious Canadians from the worlds of art, business, and government to "pass on the quality of the proof prints before the annual run of 50 each was produced and distributed. In years prior to 1963, some Cape Dorset prints had been rejected and others had been modified for the final sales run. In addition, two proof copies were to be sent to the National Museum of Canada, which thereby acquired a complete collection.

On their first try, Father Steinmann and representative Inuit visited Ottawa while the Arts Council sat in judgement on their proofs. The Council rejected practically all of them, while accepting most of the Cape Dorset product. Two of the Cape Dorset Inuit present at the meeting liked the POV prints, where the blocks were cut by the artists themselves, better than the Cape Dorset art with its very polished professional results, which they thought looked like white man's art. The same one-sided rejection occurred again the next year. Steinmann and the POV Inuit were humiliated and furious, the former claiming that this was an anti-Quebec or perhaps an anti-Catholic plot, this being exactly the period of the rising nationalistic consciousness in Quebec. Steinmann refused to cooperate with the Arts Council again.

In the meantime, the Cooperative built a print shop with modest equipment (no copper plate presses, etc.), and the Federal Northern Service Officer there, Pat Furneaux, was very supportive of local endeavors. Without "approval" in Ottawa, i.e. the Eskimo Arts Council, the print program generated very little money, so it was decided to go ahead with it, but without an expensive outside advisor. The artist Kanajuk became the local print shop manager and remained so without white advisors for decades. With little external guidance, except for Father Steinmann, the low-key print program carried on. It was quite experimental and at one point started making money from the sale of small "Christmas card" size prints and from full-size prints sold locally to visitors; these were, possibly, prints that had earlier been rejected by the Arts Council. Later, the first edition of Holman Island prints, produced under the auspices of the Catholic missionary Father Tardy, was also rejected by the Eskimo Arts Council (Pamela Stern, personal communication, 1997).
La Fédération des Coopératives du Nouveau Québec

The print-rejection episode further determined Québec francophone involvement in the future of Povungnituk art and its cooperative. This was at the height of the Québec demand to be “maître chez nous,” especially in the north (Brochu 1963). Calling upon his friends in Québec City and the Caisses Populaires, they decided to go all out to promote involvement in art production, cooperatives, and a federation of cooperatives with a wholesale unit. This was in direct opposition to a similar proposal being pushed (and subsidized) by the anglophone Ottawa government at that time. With the backing of Inuit cooperative enthusiasts in Povungnituk, they envisaged every Native village (Indian and Inuit) in Nouveau Québec having a village cooperative embracing both producers and consumers, all tied to an efficient wholesaling/marketing unit in the South, forming a Federation of cooperatives owned and under the control of the Native peoples.

The most significant move was the hiring of Peter Murdoch, the former HBCo manager Pitualluk who had invented the “camp accounts” (see above) and who had since left to work with the Ottawa government. Of course, he knew the people and the language of the area very well. Although Catholic by religion, he was a known Anglophone. This somewhat allayed the fears of many of the Inuit of POV, especially the strongly Anglican ones who had moved to POV from the Cape Smith camps and for whom: Co-op = Québec = French = Catholic.

With considerable Québec backing, the cooperative opened a retail store to compete directly against the HBCo. This retail store not only sold all manner of imported goods, but it also bought country game and fish from the Inuit and sold it back to anyone for a higher price. With the use of the community freezer, they were able to sell back months later, often when a surplus of food had become a shortage. Inuit were exorted to join, to pay the $5.00 membership towards the tungavik, the “foundation” capital of the cooperative, and promised that they would get dividends, amikatu (leftovers), in proportion to the volume of business they did there (Graburn 1970). The cooperative soon opened a sewing shop, managed by Alasi Alasuak, Father Steinmann’s talented housekeeper, to make garments and dolls for sale outside or to visitors. One of the biggest coups was the struggle to get the local Department of Northern Affairs, the largest institution in POV, to place its deposits in the Caisse Populaire and thus ensure the latter’s health. This happened under the aegis of the NSO “Pat” Furneaux, ex-RAF Battle of Britain pilot and unorthodox bureaucrat. Pat wanted to help the Inuit too by having an airstrip on land which would allow weekly fights without the usual 2-3 month long spring and fall breaks. He allowed the Inuit to use the government bulldozer to build the airstrip, and he used government funds to employ the Inuit on local projects, such as building the airstrip “by hand” and building a set of small stone “duplex houses” for the cooperative’s new tourism operation. The private owner of the mail-carrying airline, Mr. Jack Austin, was encouraged by the extra business and advertised Povungnituk far and wide. A young Inuit cooperative employee became the sales agent (and amateur meteorologist) for the airline. For a few years in the mid-sixties, tourists flew in from the U.S. and southern Canada to be taken fishing on the untamed rivers and to come and see the sculptors and the print-makers. By 1968, the cooperative was doing a total of $250,000 of business, and by 1969, it did over half a million dollars’ worth.

The apparent success of the POV co-op, I say apparent because there were more annual subsidies to the cooperatives from the Federal and Québec provincial governments than most people know about, aroused enthusiasm, strongly backed by Father Steinmann’s desire to drive the Hudson Bay Company out of the North. He and Pete Murdoch and Inuit spokesmen such as Paulasi Sivuak were like a team of preachers of some new cult, spreading the word not only in POV but to other villagers in Nouveau Québec, many of which soon founded their own cooperatives. Their motto was Inuit Imimik Imigurtut: “The Inuit by their own efforts succeed.” The hope that the Company would totally disappear was only realized in one small village where they had been suffering losses for years. The H.B. Co. was happy to sell their building and inventory to the cooperative federation for $25,000 and to lay off their only employee.

In the early 1970s, however, Father Steinmann, while still working hard for the cooperatives and the Federation, got on the wrong side of the young Native leaders who took over the multi-million dollar James Bay Hydroelectric agreement with the Government of Québec. With access to millions of dollars, they started the pan-territorial Makkivik Corporation, which spawned commercial and social
enterprises almost everywhere. Makkvik saw the cooperative Federation as their rival for Inuit loyalty, so they enthusiastically set out to reduce the power of the Québec cooperative system. Pat Furnameaux was removed from Povungnituk for "bureaucratic irregularities," and Father Steinmann retired in the mid-1970s and wrote his autobiography (Steinmann 1977). However, the cooperative federation and its stores continued to function, though with less attention to commercial art and fully in the shadow of Makkvik, and Peter Murdoch stayed on as their general manager.

Conclusion

Father Steinmann undoubtedly had a greater effect on the art of Povungnituk than any other outsider or perhaps insider. But his efforts were practical, giving encouragement and criticism, advising on pricing, and locating outlets for continued sales, rather than emphasizing specific aesthetic or stylistic features. All of this we can attribute to the efforts of a talented, energetic, opinionated, and highly social person. Father Steinmann was driven not only by the desire to improve the Inuit standard of living and their control of their own economic lives, but also to use his, and their, success in his personal battles and rivalries. He did not suffer fools gladly, and his second favorite expression was, "He's not exactly five thousand watts."

When anthropologists consider the relation between missionaries and Native arts, it is common to think of non-Christian art forms as powerful symbols of resistance to conversion. Steinmann came to a completely "Christian" land and made no great efforts to convert the Inuit to the new Christian sect. However, what he did encourage was the expression of traditional mythology and bedroom humor, and he got many Inuit to produce it (fig. 6). Thus he was symbolically "converting" the Inuit away from dour Protestantism to his own brand of earthy, French, sensual romanticism.
Although Father Steinmann and most other Oblate missionaries never made converts and never had any congregations except white people, they tended to become closer to the Inuit than most Anglican missionaries. For instance, as they were not married and had no families, they were more often available to the Inuit and were “integrated” into many functional aspects of village life. They generally stayed much longer in the North, spoke inuititit better (especially those who had stayed North during the War), and knew families over generations. In addition, their living quarters were always directly attached to (part of the same building as) their “church.” The latter, known as puluhoiaq (visiting place), also served as a warm community hall and playground for Inuit when not in use for services. It was occupied by some Inuit most of the time for schooling, movies, dances, exhibitions, community meetings, and just playing. Unlike the Anglican priests whose houses held nuclear families and were built separate from the Church, the Catholics were in and out of the public hall, chatting, playing with children and even overhearing conversations from their offices in the next room. Some Inuit were fascinated by the Catholic services, and stayed to watch the black-robed man kneeling and praying by himself, speaking Latin, and serving himself communion! (The word for Catholic priest was issirajiauq [of unknown origin], but some say it means “big kneel!”). One brilliant young Inuk in Salluit tried to learn Latin for fun, and another in Povungnituk produced artistic interpretations of these exotic behaviors. This artist, Eli Sallualuk Qirmuajuaq (the young step-brother of Daviddialuk, above, also somewhat of a marginal mystic), made a series which included a woman playing herself with a whip while kneeling in front of an altar and another of a naked standing man singing a hymn - the hymn book is open to the page “Unuak upinaq” (“Silent Night”) (fig. 7). None of these Inuit wanted to convert to Catholicism; indeed, some years later Eli Sallualuk started his own Pentecostal Church as a bulwark against drinking and drugs.  

The lesson to be learned is that missionaries do not always measure success in terms of “baptismal head counts.” They are far more than “religious” human beings, and their progress and successes can be counted in many ways, such as fostering the arts and encouraging the expression of traditional pagan mythologies. C’est la vie.

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Notes
1. The present settlement of Povungnituk is a village of some 1,000 Inuit located on the north bank 14 miles up the Povungnituk River inland on the east coast of the Hudson Bay. Conventionally, the spelling of the name (which means, “There is a rotten smell”) has been changed to the more correct orthography, Puvirnituq.

2. I am most grateful to Patrick Tozin, a graduate student in Native and Northern Studies at Carleton University, Ottawa, who sent me copies of many important archival documents from his own collection and from those deposited with the Avatay Cultural Institute of Montreàl after Father Steinmann’s death.

3. The word Inuit, an autonym, is now used for the people inhabiting the Arctic of Canada, formerly known as Eskimo, Eskimaux, or Eskimos. The latter term does not mean “eaters of raw flesh” but is derived from a southern Quebec Algonkian Indian word meaning “stranger” or “enemy” (Goddard 1984).


5. Eli Saltus made a series of sculptures with religious, sexual, and scatological themes for an art exhibition and competition that I organized in the Catholic Mission at Iqaluit in December 1967. As part of my research, I invited Inuit to compete for monetary prizes by making Tokushurnaituk (imaginative, never seen before) craving as they had complained to me that they were bored with doing the same old figures and afraid to experiment with subject matter. (Trafford 1968)

6. There was little or no Inuit drinking where I worked in Nouveau Quebec in the 1950s and 1960s. By the 1970s it became a problem in some places, and by the 1980s illegal drugs, marijuana and apawi (snow, i.e. cocaine), were imported by temporary employees, often in exchange for sculptures, and by Inuit who more frequently visited the South. Pentecostal Churches, frequently Inuit-led, with strict rules about behavior and even reading matter, became popular and successful in many communities.

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