

# **The Long Suffering**

## **Part I: Living the Yupik Inuit prophecies - The Great Famine and The Great Death**

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Amakigchik was out hunting caribou and checking the tundra marshlands for density of the black fish smolts when he heard a sound unfamiliar to his ears. As his hunting and warrior training dictated, he bent down closer to the tundra to hear the sound better. What he heard was the sound of thousands of mixed flock of birds flying with the absence of wings flapping. Puzzled, he turned his head in different directions so he could pin point which way the sound was coming from. When he became sure, he straightened up and faced east toward the mountains and started to scan the sky intensely. Finally, he saw a speck in the sky hardly visible to his well-trained eyes.

As much as he strained his eyes, he could not make out the object. Many thoughts raced through his mind of what it could be as the object started to take shape. As soon as he realized that the object had wings, he finally realized what he was staring at! It was the YAGULVAK! The most dreaded bird known to his people. The giant bird big enough to pluck out, with his beak, whales, walruses and even kayaks from the ocean!

Instinctively, he started looking

around for a place to hide. His body started to move instantaneously as he located a clump of willows on the edge of the tundra where it meets the marshland. He darted faster than a white fox and dove in expertly as only a man of his intense warrior training and experience has taught him to do. As he lay there, he hoped that the leafless willow limbs were dense enough to hide him from the sharp eyes of the giant predator. His heart sank as he remembered that his kayak was in plain view on the edge of the stream. He said a quick prayer that the color of the kayak skin would be enough to blend it with the dead grass and that the well-known powerful eyesight of the YAGULVAK would miss seeing it!

As soon as Amakigchik was sure that the giant bird was far enough away he ran to his kayak and paddled straight back to the village where he knew he would be safer. He told his people of what he had seen and helped prepare his village to deal with and confront this fierce predator.

Many of our Native Elders faced the same dilemma when they first came in contact with the white man. There were scared. Their fear grew as they got to know the type of human beings these white men were. These people came with blood and human destruction as their main legacy. They killed anyone they deemed useless that placed the Elders on top of that list. They took women and children hostage for the sole purpose of forcing men to slave labor. They destroyed homes, food caches, drying racks and hunting and fishing gears. They forced the Natives to harvest huge numbers of local fur bearing animals and, in many cases, totally

wiping out the resources that the Natives had for centuries, traditionally managed and preserved carefully in a way that maintain healthy populations of all the species that they harvested.

The Black Robes followed the path of destruction and further demoralized and traumatized the Natives by telling them that they were not good human beings, that their traditional beliefs and practices had no value and that all of this and everything close to their hearts was the work of the devil. They christianized the Natives using fear and the wrath of their God as the instrument of conversion.

For our Native Elders, that was just the beginning of a long journey that forced them to witness the long and devastating suffering of their people and Mother Earth. The stories of these acts of human and spiritual genocide spread like wildfire. The once peaceful existence of many villages was now shattered, filled with fear and anxiety.

For approximately 100 years after the Russians first invaded the villages on the Aleutian Islands and the Gulf of Alaska, the Alaska Natives experienced the Great Death. The Great Death was caused by the white man's infectious diseases of smallpox, influenza, diphtheria and polio.

Around 1920, Yupik Peoples of the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta experienced the Great Famine. For two years the delta had long severe icy winters. The first year the winter started very early. It came right after summer was over. The ice covered the land and stayed until a late summer came. It killed a majority of the coastal caribou herd that caused a population explosion of wolves. That summer, the water fowl did not nest in the delta nor did the local and migratory fish spawn in the ponds, lakes or marshlands.

The next year, winter came early again and covered the land with the deadly ice. The overpopulated wolves killed off the remaining weakened herds of caribou. When the caribou were gone, the wolves turned to prey on the village dogs. At night, the villagers had to bring their dog teams into their porches to protect them from the hunger crazed wolves. Eventually, the people had to kill their own dogs in their struggle to survive. Thousands of Yupiks starved. Whole families and sometimes villages died.

As in other parts of Alaska, the U.S. Government and the Black Robes had taken advantage of the weakened state of being of the Yupik Peoples and started their assimilation campaign. This region was the last place in Alaska that was invaded by the white

*Continued on page 7*

# • The Great Famine and The Great Death

*Continued from page 6*

man because many of the villages were inaccessible, there was no gold or other resources to attract them and there were too many mosquitoes. As late as 1950, there were no federal schools or churches in some of the villages. This fact has contributed to the preservation of many traditional aspects of the Yupik Way of Life.

Everywhere the white man came, the once honored and respected Elder village leaders were pushed aside, purposely, by the new systems of governance, education and religion that they were forced to adopt. They watched the systematic destruction of family and village communal systems. They watched the loss of their languages where their history, mythology, prophecies, knowledge and understanding of their people, Mother Earth and their universe were preserved and passed on. They watched their people lose their traditional songs, dances and sacred ceremonies that made them spiritually strong, holistically connected to Mother Earth and all living and spiritual beings within their universe.

The Elders watched the inexperienced young leaders stumble through their tremendous tasks of representing and making decisions that affected their people and their villages. They watched them suffer and succumb to the enormous pressures from the white man. They watched them fall prey to the cunning, baffling and powerful addictions of alcohol and drugs. They watched them being forced to disconnect from their families' people and villages.

The Elders watched their grandchildren grow up not knowing who they are. They watched them grow up not speaking their traditional languages. They watched them grow up not embracing their traditional culture, songs and dances. They watched them become victims of the joint federal and Christian systems designed to destroy the very core of what made them distinct Indigenous Peoples and Tribes. They watched the children dying from alcohol, drugs and suicides.

Many of today's Elders are those children who grew up in that oppressive system and became the victims of the well planned and executed social and spiritual genocide. Like their Ancestors and their parents, they were pushed aside and their great knowledge and wisdom was not tapped into whenever critical decisions were made. Often when they spoke their own people laughed at them and made fun of their ideas, values and suggestions. At times, they even called them dumb or stupid.

Fortunately, there are Elders, yesterday and today, who refused to totally surrender to the assimilation process. They quietly and whenever necessary, secretly spoke their Native tongue, sang their peoples songs and danced

their traditional dances. Some even refused to convert to the fundamental Christian religions and continued to practice their traditional sacred ceremonies. These Elders participated whenever individuals and tribes stood up against the laws of the federal and state governments that were against the laws of the federal and state governments that were detrimental to their people and their Way of Life. Because of these Elders, the Alaska Native Peoples WAY OF LIFE has survived.

The Native Elders need their Peoples' love, care and most important, their utmost respect. They are the survivors who still have the knowledge and wisdom of our Ancestors, who, since time immemorial, perfected the Way of Life. They have been suffering for a long time and it is the responsibility of the Native community to provide support in their

healing and recovery process. The Great Famine continues for the Elders as they watch their people starve for the traditional values, beliefs, principals and practices that once made them spiritually strong and connected. For the elders, the Great Death continues as well, as they witness the large numbers of tribal people dying from alcohol, other drugs and suicide.

The Indigenous Peoples of Alaska needs to put their Elders back to their rightful place, the

highest place of honor. They need to be recognized as the leaders they truly are and not diminish them to an advisory role. The re-activation of Traditional Elders Council systems throughout Alaska would be a positive reaffirmation of the Peoples respect for them. In this way, they can also honor their Ancestors who have passed, for generations, the time tested knowledge and wisdom impregnated in the traditional systems of governance, education and the Way of Life.

Furthermore, they can honor the Native warriors who fought and died for their protection and survival.

Years later, Amakigchik found out what nearly made him jump out of his waterproof mukluks. It was his first sighting of an airplane. He is now smiling, singing his favorite warrior song and beating his drum along with all of his Ancestors because they know their people are strong and will survive as NATIVE PEOPLES!