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### Article abstract

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# The case of Pelagie Inuk: The only Inuk woman to become a Grey Nun

Frédéric Laugrand\* and Jarich Oosten\*\*

**Résumé:** Le cas de Pélagie Inuk: la seule femme inuk à devenir une sœur grise

Dans l'Arctique, les religieuses autochtones n'ont jamais été étudiées. Dans cet article, nous présentons le cas de Pélagie Inuk, qui est devenue une sœur grise. Motivée par son désir d'aider les autres, Pélagie a d'abord fait le choix de vivre en célibataire comme une religieuse plutôt qu'en femme mariée dans une famille inuit. Les missionnaires l'ont souvent présentée comme un modèle qui a su prendre le bon chemin, contrairement à d'autres individus qui ont conservé leurs traditions «païennes», ou chamaniques, mais son histoire de vie montre qu'elle est restée partagée entre ces voies conflictuelles avant de revenir finalement à sa vie de femme au sein d'une famille inuit.

**Abstract:** The case of Pelagie Inuk: The only Inuk woman to become a Grey Nun

In the Arctic, no studies have been made of Indigenous nuns. In this paper we present the case of Pelagie Inuk, who became a Grey Nun. Motivated by a wish to help other people, Pelagie chose the celibate life of a Grey Nun, instead of a married life in an Inuit family. The missionaries often presented her as a role model who took the right path in contrast to other individuals who clung to their “pagan,” i.e. shamanic traditions, but her life history shows that she remained caught between conflicting traditions and finally opted for life in an Inuit family.

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## Introduction

Studies on the development of Christianity usually focus on male missionaries and their organizations and pay less attention to female congregations<sup>1</sup> or to Indigenous

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<sup>1</sup> In Canada, nuns have been studied by historians and sociologists (e.g., Bruno-Joffré 2005; Dumont 1986; Gauthier 2008; Juteau and Laurin 1997; Laperrière 1996, 1999, 2005; Laurin et al. 1991; Robillard 2001) but unfortunately Indigenous nuns have been left aside.

nuns.<sup>2</sup> In North America, Indigenous nuns have been numerous, especially among the Indians and the Métis. A famous example from the 17th century is the Iroquois woman Kateri Tekakwita, studied by Alan Greer (2005) and recently declared a saint by Pope Benedict XVI.

A few other Indian women have become nuns, especially among the Ojibway, the Mohawks, the Innu, and the Cree. In the Arctic, Inuit have been encouraged to take up leading roles in religious life. Among the Catholics a few candidates for the priesthood emerged in the 1940s, whereas among the Anglicans many Inuit had already been appointed pastors and ministers. Some Inuit women wished to join the Grey Nuns.<sup>3</sup> Missionary sources show that in the early years of the missions to Inuit camps the missionaries mainly taught women and children who remained in the camp while the men were out hunting. Women appear to have been the first to receive the gospel and probably played a key role in the conversion process.

In the Eastern Arctic, out of a few candidates, only one woman has managed to go through the whole initiation process to become a Grey Nun: Sister Pelagie Inuk. Born in 1931, Sister Pelagie Povaliraq Katsuak died at the age of 79, on July 12, 2010. When she died, the Aboriginal press released a short message stressing her assistance to children who attended residential schools, and her great generosity, “She lived a life of caring and courage and persuaded many people through her quiet, loving, kind manner. She led by example, a life of service, dedication, and commitment to her faith and family” (Anonymous 2010). Pelagie’s family received condolences from across Nunavut, and people often recounted their fond memories of her (e.g., Nanisiniq 2011). Pelagie was a well-respected elder. She quit the order of the Grey Nuns in the early 1970s, but she continued to be involved in church activities until she died.

The recruitment of an Inuk woman as a nun was unique in the 20th century. It took place when an ideology of colonialism was still strong. In the late 1930s missionaries, RCMP constables, and traders of the Hudson’s Bay Company or other smaller companies were still the only external agents in the area with considerable power and authority. The Second World War opened a new era with a much stronger impact by the Canadian administration on Inuit life. In the 1950s, many Inuit left their nomadic camps to settle in permanent communities. Hunters might have continued their nomadic lifestyle for some time, but under the pressure of Northern Affairs programs,

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<sup>2</sup> For Central America, see the important work by Diaz (2010). For 200 years, Indigenous people were excluded from participating in the priesthood and only gradually allowed to enter the orders. According to Diaz (2010), initially women—with a few exceptions—were only allowed to enter the convents as servants and never as professed nuns. After 1724, when the first foundation for Indigenous women was agreed upon, many Indigenous women, mostly “Indian noblewomen” who were descendants of Moctezuma and other Mexican dignitaries, became nuns under Franciscan jurisdiction (*ibid.*: 35).

<sup>3</sup> The Grey Nuns belong to the order of the Sisters of Charity, which Marie-Marguerite de Lajemmarais d’Youville founded in 1737 with the objective to help the poor. They arrived in Canada in 1844 at the invitation of Bishop Provencher, who thought they could help the Oblate missionaries who had just arrived in Saint Boniface to evangelize the Indians (Duchaussois 1919, 1920). In 1931, a group of nuns from Saint Nicolet was sent to Chesterfield Inlet to take care of a hospital built the same year. On the history of the nuns in the North, see Boily (2000); Gresko (1996); and Mitchell (1970).

they began to send their children to local schools or to residential schools in Chesterfield Inlet or Churchill, where a new generation of bilingual Inuit were educated. The missionaries in charge of the schools wished to train a new elite, hoping they would help the Inuit to adapt to modernity, while preserving traditional values and the Inuit language. At that time most people expected Inuit to become like Qallunaat. It was in this ideological context marked by socio-economic and political transformations that Roman Catholic missionaries recruited Pelagie and made her into a role model. Separated from her family, Pelagie was expected to become a Qallunaat-style nun.

In this paper, we explore the story of Pelagie and some of her fellow novices who tried to follow the same path. We use historical and archival documents and oral information collected over the last 10 years in Nunavut, notably interviews with Pelagie and other elders. We will see how the missionaries spent much energy stimulating and promoting these vocations not only to demonstrate their success in the Kivalliq Region, just as they did in Pelly Bay, but also to mark the advent of a new era in which shamanism had given way to Catholicism.<sup>4</sup> Accounts from other elders show that such a conclusion was based on wishful thinking, as many shamanic practices did not really disappear but went underground. Many features of shamanism were attributed to the new religion and to the missionaries themselves, who were often considered to be *angakkuit* ('shamans'). Strong relationships to the ancestors were preserved in the naming system, and social bonds remained as strong as ever. Inuit women following a religious vocation were caught between the traditional values of Inuit life and those of the Christian religion and the Qallunaat ideology. In the long run they all rejected the celibate life implied by their vocation and returned to Inuit family life.

### **Igluligaarjuk: The birth of a Catholic community**

When they opened their first mission in Chesterfield Inlet, in 1912, the Oblate missionaries faced indifference and resistance. Initial success came with Joseph Tuni's conversion in 1916 and resulted in some group conversions over the following years, particularly in 1917 and 1923 (Laugrand 2002; Laugrand and Oosten 2009). More conversions followed between 1923 and the mid-1930s, with the conversion of the shaman Taliriktuq. After this event, the Christian faith was more and more adopted by the Inuit. In 1931, the year when Pelagie was born, the Catholic mission was strengthened by the arrival of the Grey Nuns. They ran a hospital that the Inuit very much appreciated.

In the 1940s, the hospital had become an important institution in the area, and many disabled Inuit were treated there. The hospital was initially called *aaniarvik* ('the place where one goes when he/she feels sick') but the Inuit soon nicknamed it *Pijunngairvik*, 'the place where one goes to be healed or get well' (Qapuk, pers. comm. 2003; see also Michaud 2004). Shamanism had by no means disappeared. When a

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<sup>4</sup> Such a strategy was also used in Pelly Bay (Oosten and Remie 2002).

severe epidemic of diphtheria broke out in the region, shamans such as Nagjuk, Qimuksiraaq, and many others worked to counteract it. Some nuns, such as Sister Cécile Bisson (pers. comm. 2004) and Sister Levasseur (pers. comm. 2007), related to us that they greatly enjoyed watching Qinuksiraaq perform in the hospital, with his walrus teeth extending from his mouth.

## **Pelagie**

In 1946, the Grey Nuns received a young woman who announced her wish to become one of them. In the Chronicles of Chesterfield Inlet's Sainte Thérèse de l'Enfant Jésus hospital, the nuns quoted extensively from a paper by Father Jean Philippe (1951a), later published in *Eskimo* and in a few other journals. It was written on the occasion of Pelagie's first vows at the Institute of the Grey Nuns in Montreal, on February 15, 1951.

Naya ['nun'] Pelagie's story is quite interesting. She belongs to the Padlemiut tribe of Eskimo Point. Her father, Okatsiak, an old shaman, was with his wife among the first converted of his tribe and, later, both always behaved like Christian models. On March 9, 1931, in an igloo somewhere inland, Joseph Okatsiak's wife gave birth to a little girl who received the name of Pulvalerak, and later was baptized as Pelagie (APN/Chroniques de l'hôpital: 443-444).<sup>5</sup>

Pelagie was baptized the day of her birth by Father Alain Kermel. We do not know why the Oblates chose this name. According to de Voragine (1902[1261-1266]), the name of Pelagia belonged to a rich woman who lived in Antioch and was well-known for her beauty. Living as a prostitute and said to be possessed by the Devil, she was always followed by many people until she converted and was baptized. She became a hermit and gave all of her wealth to the poor. She died in 290 A.D.<sup>6</sup> According to Philippe, Pelagie was raised like any Inuit girl. Philippe used her example to show how much her simple life helped to give her strength, joyfulness, and wisdom.

Like others, Pelagie lived the first two years of her life on her mother's back. Like others, she remained in the igloo in winter, and in the tent in summer. Her food was caribou, frozen most of the time, and also seal or fish. She was often involved in traditional games. She learnt from her mother how to sew, scrape, and chew the skins intended for clothing. She shared in the simple life, unconscious but hard of these Arctic Gypsies. Ten years ago, I had the occasion to visit for a few weeks the Eskimo camp where Pelagie was living. She was a wise, pleasant, and merry child who was hardly different from the other young children (APN/Chroniques de l'hôpital: 443-444).

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<sup>5</sup> All French quotes have been translated by the authors.

<sup>6</sup> Pelagia's death was described by St. John Chrysostom (ca. 349-407 A.D.). According to him, Pelagia was arrested after she converted to Christianity when she was just 15 years old. To avoid being raped, she decided to commit suicide. While under arrest at her home, she asked for permission to go and change her clothes, jumped from the roof, and died (<http://nominis.cef.fr/contenus/saint/1978/Sainte-Pelagie-la-Penitente.html>).

According to the same source, Pelagie stopped at the Chesterfield Inlet hospital after an epidemic of diphtheria and came to meet the Grey Nuns, who greatly impressed her. Another missionary, Father Bouffard, gives more details. He relates that in 1925, Pelagie's brother Thomas Okatsiar was gravely ill. Their father first intended to heal him through shamanism but, as the treatment did not work, he decided to turn to the Catholic missionaries,<sup>7</sup> promising that if his son were healed, he himself would convert to Christianity. In 1925-1926, both of Pelagie's parents were baptized under the names of Joseph and Cécile Okatsiar (Bouffard 1956: 101). According to Bouffard (1956: 102), at first Pelagie had no intention of becoming a nun. Philippe also related that she experienced her vocation much later, and he emphasized her courage in opposing shamanism,

In 1945, an epidemic of diphtheria made many victims among the Padlemiut tribe. To sooth what he believed to be the anger and punishment of ancestral spirits, an Eskimo made himself the apostle of a new religion. He went from camp to camp, preaching a return to the old ways of pagan rules and superstitions. He tried to win over Pelagie's family, whom he knew to be enthusiastic. During a big shamanic ritual, he tried to invoke and make visible the deceased grandfather's spirit, thus hoping to convince people of his divine mission. But he finally had to conclude: "Your Father is too high in the sky, I can't make him come down." And disappointed, he went away and continued elsewhere his proselytism.

[...] It is during that time that Pelagie felt as if an inside voice were inviting her to devote herself to God for the sake of her Eskimo brothers. Once consulted, the father was extremely happy to offer his daughter to God. Pelagie's request was approved by Bishop Lacroix, and in 1946, Pelagie came to Chesterfield Inlet (APN/Chroniques de l'hôpital: 443-444).

Philippe contrasted Pelagie's reaction with that of a shaman, probably Donald Suluk or Sulutnar, who tried to cope with the epidemic by combining Christian and shamanic traditions. By contrasting Pelagie with Suluk, the missionaries wanted to show the right path, i.e. the emergence of Christian Inuit leaders who would completely relinquish shamanic traditions. The Oblate missionary Charles Choque (1985: 117-118) provides a very critical view of Suluk, but many Inuit still remember him as a very powerful *angakkuq*,<sup>8</sup> an excellent musician, and a Christian preacher. When we interviewed Pelagie about her vocation, she related a different story:

I learned about Christianity through my parents. My parents were already baptized. My father Joseph Okatsiaq would pray a lot and he always wanted to help. [...] It was in 1943 when we lived inland in the igloo with my older brother Thomas Siatalaq. He just died a year ago. Back then, my brother used to wake up early in the morning and pray to God, saying Our Father prayer. During that time, he would get up early in the morning, look towards the North facing the wind. After he prayed that morning, and as he was going to go back to bed, he experienced something. At that time, there was an adjoining igloo with the

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<sup>7</sup> Catholic missionaries had just opened a mission post in Eskimo Point (Arviat) in 1924.

<sup>8</sup> Thus Felix Kupak recalled that "Sulu'naaq was a powerful man. He was able to show his spirit" (Laugrand and Oosten 2012: 77). According to Ollie Itinnuaq (pers. comm. 2003), Suluk was an *angakkuq* who "was able to let you see the soul of the dead persons."

same doorway where my mother would stay. That morning, without knowing, my brother turned to my mother's igloo and in the doorway he experienced a very strong feeling from God. After this strong feeling, Christianity really became very strong in our lives (Pelagie, pers. comm. 2005).<sup>9</sup>

In a 2006 interview, Pelagie recalled attaching an object to Suluk's belt so that her own wish to become a nun would be fulfilled (Laugrand and Oosten 2009: 65). Her account contrasts sharply with that of the Oblate missionaries who present Pelagie as a Christian role model, a "light" supposed to inspire others (Choque 1951),<sup>10</sup> or a "flower of the snow," to use Father Alain Kermel's expression (Kermel 1950: 12). Pelagie did not reject shamanism in the same way as the missionaries did, and was prepared to make good use of it. Pelagie's account provides more details about her intentions to become a nun, when she asked her mother to be sent to Igluligaarjuk in 1946:

I was born in 1931 and it was in 1946 when my father died that I asked my mother if I could go to Igluligaarjuk to go to school with the nuns. She said "Yes." So that summer I went to Igluligaarjuk by boat. There were no planes here at that time. [...] I did not have any plan to become a nun but I wanted to try the life with the nuns. I was happy to become a nun. It was something I wanted to do. Nuns were people like us, not different from us. But the nuns' responsibility was to help sick people and to help the people in need. I asked the priest if I could join the nuns at the age of 13. He told me that I was too young. So I waited. Finally at the age of 15, I went to school to Igluligaarjuk. I was just living an ordinary life there. I was 15 years old. It was the everyday life like any of us. It was only when I turned 17 that I started taking a learning responsibility as a nun. (Pelagie, pers. comm. 2006).

Her account shows how strongly Pelagie was rooted in her family. She asked for permission to leave the house and waited to be old enough to be accepted as a novice by the priests. According to Sister Levasseur (pers. comm. 2007) Pelagie's parents asked the priest to send their daughter to the nuns so that she could escape an arranged marriage. She may even have been given by her parents to the nuns to be adopted by them. Pelagie (1954) explained that her decision to become a nun was not always easy to accept for others and resulted in many rumours. She stated that, in contrast to what people thought, she did not choose to become a nun to please her brother Thomas. The choice was her own decision, as she wanted to help people and pray to Jesus. Pelagie perceived a nun's role as one of someone helping others, and this is always emphasized by her and by other Inuit who remember her.

### **Pelagie's initiation**

In 1944, when only 13 years old, Pelagie expressed her wish to become a nun. On August 1, 1946, through a specific rule of the Catholic hierarchy in Rome, she was invited to go to the Chesterfield Inlet hospital in order to start her "postulate and

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<sup>9</sup> Pelagie's statement is consistent with what she wrote in 1954 when she explained that her vocation started when she was about 13 years old (see Pelagie 1954: 18-19).

<sup>10</sup> In the same text, Father Choque contrasted Pelagie with Suluk, whom he described as a "spirit from darkness" (Choque 1951).

novitiate.” She arrived in Chesterfield Inlet from Eskimo Point on August 5, 1946. On February 8, 1948, Father Eugène Fafard announced to the Inuit Pelagie’s admission as a postulant, and on August 4, 1948 she officially became a Grey Nun. The bishop, the priests, and the whole Inuit population attended the ceremony. It was presided by Father Lionel Ducharme, who acknowledged that Pelagie’s novitiate would start on February 1949. Ducharme had already translated Pelagie’s statements from Inuktitut into French, and they were published later in Pelagie (1954). From an aspirant on August 5, 1946, she became a postulant on August 4, 1948, and a novice on February 5, 1949. Finally, on February 15, 1951, after two periods of retreat, she agreed to take her “first vows” in a service presided by Bishop Marc Lacroix. The Grey Nuns were overjoyed by Pelagie’s decision. Their chronicles describe the process extensively and suggest that she was sent to Chesterfield Inlet by Father Henri-Paul Dionne and Father Roland Courtemanche.

August 5, 1946. For our Institute, this day marked the admission of the postulants. By a happy coincidence we welcomed maternally an Eskimo girl named Pelagie, who comes from Eskimo Point. She has been sent to us by Father Dionne, to whom she expressed her great desire to become one of us, which will be fulfilled later (APN/Chroniques de l’hôpital).

But apparently Pelagie was not the only candidate. A few months later, another woman is mentioned in the archives, “November 1946. The two young Eskimo girls who wish to become Grey Nuns witnessed the ceremony, which they appreciated much, in particular, the canticle “From the bottom of my heart, my God I renew.” We ask for their perseverance.” Pelagie’s first vows are described in more detail by Father Jean Philippe:

The four years and a half of preparation are finished. The expected day of the profession has finally arrived. [...] The Bishop finally entered in procession at the chapel where all the Eskimo of the area now gathered for the ceremony. [...] He sat down and questioned the young novice. Questions and answers were given in the Eskimo language. Even though Naya Pelagie understands French rather well, she has still some difficulties in speaking French fluently. Kneeling at the altar and accompanied by Sister Saint-Ignace de Loyola and Sister Sainte Thérèse de l’Enfant Jesus, who have both been working in Chesterfield Inlet for 20 years now, Naya Pelagie answered clearly the Bishop’s questions, “Atatatsiaralouk (Grandfather) — it is the name that the Eskimos give the bishop — I ask humbly that I may be allowed to devote my life entirely to God, to serve [...] Jesus Christ in the person of the poor [...] (APN/Chroniques de l’hôpital).

Finally, kneeling down, Sister Pelagie pronounced her vows, which bound her for one year to devote her life to the service of the Lord. The vows would be freely renewed each year and, in five years’ time, followed by the perpetual vows. The vows were written in syllabic characters, and all the Eskimos could now read them. They would be carefully preserved and placed in the nun’s coffin on the day of her death.

With a firm and distinct voice that resounded well in the silence of the chapel, with an ease and dignity that impressed the audience, the young Eskimo 20 years of age [...] now declared: “[...] I, Pelagie, freely make for a year [...] the vow of poverty, chastity, and



obedience [...]. [...] I must tell you that I was moved from within and I believe that all, Eskimos and Whites, were too. The Grey Nuns now have a new member, the first one to be Eskimo” (APN/Chroniques de l’hôpital).

The missionaries Bouffard and Philippe recalled the exact formula that she used when she presented her first vows to Bishop Lacroix,

- *Toukissitsiarallouarpit?* (Do you really understand the importance of the decision you are making?) Bishop Lacroix asked.

- *Amilar, atasiaralouk, kiauyimiatsiarpaunga.* (Yes grandfather, I know them all and I wish that God who calls me will assist me.)

- *Auwanga, Pelagie, illaotitaoyomablounga* (I, Pelagie, freely make my profession.) (Bouffard 1956: 100).

On November 18, 1948, the Grey Nuns heard on the radio that Pope Pius XII had approved the novitiate of Pelagie Inuk (Figure 1), “The Pope grants an Eskimo girl the right to enter as a novice in the community of the Grey Nuns of Chesterfield Inlet. We believe that she is the first Eskimo to become a nun. We are filled with emotion and happiness.”<sup>11</sup> Father Jean Philippe (1951a) related that a team from the National Film Board of Canada (NFBC) had filmed the ceremony, which soon would be seen on cinema screens in Canada and the United States. For the Oblates, this solemn moment illustrated the victory they had been expecting for so many years. By allowing the NFB to record the ceremony, they hoped to show how the adoption of Christianity had ushered in a new era. In Quebec, many newspapers and religious journals commented on the news (e.g., Anonymous 1954; De Corbie 1952; Laviolette 1951; Morin 1952; Philippe 1951b).

On July 13, 1951, Pelagie wrote a letter to Father Thibert, asking him to translate into Inuktitut the *Life of St. Therese of the Child Jesus*, the patron saint of the Chesterfield Inlet hospital. She explained, “If I knew better the life of the Little Flower, I could make more efforts to perfect myself, therefore I could be of more service to Jesus and the Eskimos. I wish to imitate the Little Flower for I know her life was perfect” (Pelagie 1988[1952]: 133). At the end of her letter, she added, “Also two of my Eskimo friends wish to become Sisters, and I want very much to help them in their religious training. This is why I would like to have, in syllabic writing, the Eskimo translation of St. Therese’s life. I will take her for my model. For I know that she had great love and devotion to Our Lord” (ibid.). In her letter she emphasized the power of prayer, “I am certain that through prayer I can greatly help the Eskimos and the Priests. Prayer in itself can accomplish a lot and inspires confidence” (ibid.).

In a paper published a few years later, Pelagie (1954: 19) again stressed her effort to better understand God’s wishes, “our Creator and our Father.” She referred to her deep love for Jesus and Mary, as well as to her intention to evangelize those who were still lost or in need. According to Pelagie, Inuit were converting very slowly. They remained greatly attached to shamanism and did not believe in God but made fun of

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<sup>11</sup> APN/Chroniques de l’hôpital, November 18, 1948, p. 397.

him. She added, “they only think about their bodies, do they realize that they have a soul?” Again, she expressed her wishes to follow St. Therese of the Child Jesus, “St. Therese never refused anything and I want to behave like her” (Pelagie 1954: 19).



Figure 1. Sister Pelagie (left) with three unidentified Inuit. Source: Archives Provinciales de Nicolet.

Pelagie was seen as a role model for other candidates, and the Christian rituals helped her to accept her new role among the Inuit. She gradually became more familiar with the French language.<sup>12</sup> Although many Inuit considered her initiation as a nun to be a success, Inuit men often pointed out that Inuit were not made to become nuns but rather made to become spouses (Levasseur, pers. comm. 2004). Qapuk (pers. comm. 2003), from Rankin Inlet, recalled Naja Pelagie as a well-respected person and saw not much difference between her and other nuns, “She was working just like the other nuns

<sup>12</sup> APN, Letter from Sister Ignace de Loyola, April 10, 1952.

when she was living there. [...] We all respect her just as we do other nuns. We knew she was a real nun.” Louis Tapardjuk, however, and Sister Arcand, another Indigenous nun, remembered her as being very different from the other sisters, since they were not so strict at the Chesterfield Inlet residential school.

### **More Inuit candidates**

On April 23, 1952, the missionaries and the nuns not only discussed the progress of Pelagie but also referred to two other candidates besides Pelagie, probably the friends Pelagie referred to in her letter. They did not say much about Blandine and appear not to have supported Marie.

Sister Pelagie, like I said to you in my previous letter, only gives us consolations. Father Arthur Thibert translated the life of Sainte Therese of the Child Jesus into Eskimo for her. And it is very helpful for her. Now, she better understands both the renouncement and the religious life. She is quite nice. As for French, she is starting to understand more and more and sometimes now she risks a word. Blandine is at St Norbert. She says that she understands a little bit of French. As for Marie, I believe that she will go back to her parents this summer. [...] I am glad to have asked that her admission be delayed [...]. She’s a good girl. She will make a good wife and will be more in her element there [...].<sup>13</sup>

In an interview, Pelagie acknowledged that she was not alone, “At first, there were three of us to be candidates to be nuns but the two other candidates couldn’t go on. One was sick with TB in her lungs. The other one couldn’t go on with her studies. She gave up” (Pelagie, pers. comm. 2005). About Marie, we could not find any further information. But the archives provide more information about Blandine. According to the archives, Blandine was also known as Nennout (Nennaut) and was originally from Chesterfield Inlet. Bouffard (1956: 106) related that she separated from her boyfriend at the age of 15 in order to become a nun in 1953. She made her “first vows” on August 19, 1953 but finally decided not to continue on March 8, 1954. In the Chronicles of the Chesterfield Inlet hospital, the nuns related, “August 19, 1953. Blandine Nennout who had been living with us since the spring, aspiring to the religious life, sees her desire filled by donning the postulant habit. We wish her perseverance.” The next winter, the nuns obtained confirmation of Blandine’s wishes: “January 16, 1954. A telegram announces to us that Sister Blandine will be donning the religious habit in August. She is making a great sacrifice, since she is so keen to wear the Grey Nun habit.” But on March 8, 1954 Blandine decided not to pursue her vocation: “Sister Blandine returns to her family.” On June 7, 1954, she married: “Today Blandine Samurtok (ex-postulating) is marrying Celestino.”

Two more women were candidates to become nuns. Born in 1936, in Igloolik, Alexina Nutaradjuk (also known as Alexina Makkik, according to Lechat 2006) became a postulant on August 5, 1955 (Figure 2), and a novice on August 15, 1956 but then abandoned her vocation on March 18, 1957. The nuns only made a brief reference

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<sup>13</sup> APN, Letter from Sister Ignace de Loyola, April 23, 1952.

to these events, “August 15, 1956. At eight o’clock a ceremony took place at the church. Alexina Nutarardjuk became one of us, followed by the perpetual vows of Sister Pelagie Innuk. After having read her vows in French, she then read them in Eskimo so that everyone could listen to this with attention.” But on March 18, 1957, “Sister Alexina was unfrocked. Before going back to her family she needs to go to the sanatorium.” Other vocations were found and more or less encouraged by the nuns.



Figure 2. Sister Alexina when she was a “postulant.” Source: *Eskimo* (1957: 22).

Father Jean-Marie Cochard related the case of Melanie Arnaluk, born at Eskimo Point in 1924. On January 10, 1947, four days before her death at the Chesterfield Inlet hospital, the nuns wrote in their chronicles:

It has to be noted that this woman, who was converted with her family, had been promised to a pagan when she was young, and she had no choice but to accept this. But Melanie wished to be a nun. After her wedding, she was persecuted. She even had to throw her religious objects in the fire. But in her heart, her faith and her love for God was only becoming greater. Also, among the confidences she made to us, let’s mention the following

one, which shows her spiritual attitude: “Myself, I didn’t want to get married. I wanted to become a nun like you. I always prayed and worked with that desire. Also, I think that the Lord (Nunaliorte) will reward me as if I had been a nun (APN/Chroniques de l’hôpital).

Baptized in 1932, Melanie was like many other Inuit stricken by diphtheria in 1944. After the nuns treated her, she wished to join the Grey Nuns (Cochard 1949: 32). In 1945, while still ill, she was admitted to the hospital. After a while she got better and started helping the nuns. But, in 1946, she became seriously sick again, with intestinal tuberculosis. Two months before her death, she wrote to Father Thibert, “A long time ago I wanted to become a nun. It is only because I couldn’t do it, that I did not become one [...] I was not ‘the boss.’ My future father-in-law wanted me to become the wife of his son.”<sup>14</sup> A few days before her death she composed a prayer, which Father Cochard (1949: 34) quoted:

*Kuvianartomut aisuabnakuni:* I look forward to going to heaven...

*Ananak Mari ikayulaurtigut:* O Mother Mary, help us...

*Ananak, Jesusemut ananagiwaptigit:* Mother, through Jesus we have you as a mother...

*Attilu Innuvit okpingitut ikayorlugit, kobveriyaukoblugit tuksiarviginaptigit:* We’re begging you, help the Inuit, help them to believe and be baptized!

Father Robert Lechat also recalled the case of Salome Paoktut. Born in Igloodik in 1941 (or 1947), she wanted to become a nun, but she did not go further than the level of postulant.

### **Pelagie and her work for the Catholic Diocese of Churchill - Hudson Bay**

In the Chronicles of the Hospital, Father Jean Philippe related that Pelagie’s life with the Nuns was not always easy despite her great devotion, “The young novice once told the nuns: ‘Why am I born as an Eskimo? You have many thoughts and you can pray for a long period of time, but for me it is very difficult.’” (APN/Chroniques de l’hôpital: 445). Elsewhere he wrote:

Without losing her charming simplicity, the young Eskimo acquired distinction, without being imposing, evoking the respect of all. [...] At the beginning, one of the elders declared: “It is a pity that Pelagie wants to become a nun. She is an excellent girl and she could be a very good wife for my grandson.” Now Pelagie Puvlalerak does not exist anymore for the Eskimos. She is now Naya Pelagie and they would never dare to be familiar with her (APN/Chroniques de l’hôpital).

That elder still considered Pelagie to be a potential wife for his grandson, and more people may have seen her as a potential bride or daughter-in-law. Becoming a nun may also have been a way to escape marriage. Bouffard related:

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<sup>14</sup> The original Inuktitut text is: “*Taipsomani nayagoromalaurpunga, ayornarmalli kissiani pilaunginama, issumataunginama, aksualungmik uikagomangilauralluarama, sakkiksalaura issumaminik pilaurmat*” (Cochard 1949: 32).

Several women indeed, writes [Pelagie], were in search of daughters-in-law according to the Eskimo tradition. But their requests were of no use. When they realized my intention, they had bad words for me and my older brother. They were saying that I only wanted to become a nun to please my brother. On the contrary, I was the one who told him my intention and he didn't object to it. He himself had suffered from the mischievousness of the men, of the influence of the shamans and other preachers. He taught that this way, I would be able to pray to God and that I would even pray more for him. That's the reason why he agreed to my desire (Bouffard 1956: 103).

Pelagie never discussed these issues in detail with us but often pointed out that her new life resulted in much traveling for her, "As a nun, I was not always in Igluligaarjuk. I went to Montreal, Quebec City, and Winnipeg."

On July 1953, Pelagie left the community for the South. A nun reported in the chronicles:

The Hudson's Bay Company plane that passed by a few days ago returned today. The pilot was kind and took Pelagie Innuk on board his plane. Pelagie is going to Saint Boniface for some time. She will stop in Eskimo Point to visit her brothers and sisters whom she has not seen for six years now. Sister Therese of the Child Jesus will travel with her. We wish her a good trip, and to Sister Pelagie Innuk we wish her happiness among the White people down south (APN/Chroniques de l'hôpital).

In the chronicles we lose Pelagie's path. Sister Levasseur (pers. comm. 2004) related that one day Pelagie was sitting in a park in Winnipeg admiring the trees. Some local nuns thought she was waiting for a man and after this incident she was sent to a private home, which she did not like at all. After a few years she was sent back to Chesterfield Inlet. In another interview conducted in 2013, Sister Levasseur related that, despite warnings by the sisters, Pelagie would often go out in the evenings, wishing to socialize with friends and other people. Pelagie's name suddenly reappears in the archives a few months later. According to Bérubé (1954), Pelagie was sent back to the Chesterfield Inlet hospital on October 7, 1954 after a period spent in Manitoba, but no reasons were given.

Later the nuns provided more information. In the entries for August 1 to 17, 1955, it is stated that Pelagie visited her family in Chesterfield Inlet with Sister Thibault. A few months later, on October 29, 1955, the chronicles state: "Pelagie gave birth to a son. The baptism took place in our chapel, Sunday the 30th. His name is Yvon" (APN/Chroniques de l'hôpital). When we interviewed her, Pelagie did not wish to say anything about what happened. The Oblates and the Grey Nuns hardly made any comment on this unexpected event. Pelagie may often have rejected Qallunaaq rules and discipline (Gjerstad and Kreelak 1998), but she always felt grateful to the nuns and the missionaries. However, various reasons can explain this silence, since Pelagie probably wanted to remain in the diocese and the Church agreed. Pelagie's vocation was thus not brought to an end. On August 15, 1956, she presented "her eternal vows" and a year later, on August 14, 1957, the nuns related: "Sister Pelagie Innuk has her

obedience for the hospital; we welcome our youngest one” ((APN/Chroniques de l’hôpital: 555).

Pelagie remained within the order until 1970. The archives are silent on the reasons for her departure. Nor were the Inuit interviewed on the topic in Arviat and Chesterfield willing to discuss the reasons. The Grey Nuns themselves and even Sister Yvette Paquin who knew Pelagie quite well never gave us a clear picture either. There is no evidence for Timothy Leduc’s (2010: 117) speculation about Pelagie having been abused or unable to countenance the abuse inflicted on Inuit children at the residential school. Pelagie may often have rejected Qallunaaq rules and discipline (Gjerstad and Kreelak 1998), but she always felt grateful to the nuns and the missionaries. Marco Michaud (2004) only quoted what he was told by Blandine’s brother who said he was not aware of the reason that motivated Pelagie to leave the order, “I don’t know why she left. It’s like one day the most important thing was to be a *naya*, and the next day she decided to leave.”<sup>15</sup> Other elders only commented: “People were proud that an Inuit woman was training to become a nun.”<sup>16</sup>

Pelagie moved back to Arviat and, according to sister Levasseur (pers. comm. 2004), she joined the man she was once promised to as a wife. As this man was already living with another woman, Pelagie had to wait for a while doing chores in the house until the first wife died. She finally married her intended husband Mark Nanaut and gave birth to a daughter in 1976. When we interviewed her in 2003, she reflected on her life,

I loved the work because in those days there were no community schools. It was the only way for me to help people because I like helping people. It makes me happy to help people. When I went there I did my part in helping others who are in need. My work was not taking part in a school. It was not a learning job. It was a job of training because that hospital in Igluligaarjuk was a place for special people, for handicapped people. Sometimes the nuns were very tired. I was [there] to help them. It was the only place to help people in Igluligaarjuk. It was hard work. You have to be entirely dedicated to the cause. It is the same thing being a nun. You have to work hard and keep at it. I spent all these years with the nuns thanks to the support I received from other people. I thought to give up but I continued with the support of others. I was ordained in 1946 and I left in 1951 or later. There were a lot of nuns who worked there for a while and then gave up. 1969 is the time I really quit the Nuns. I also worked at the school until it closed. I was happy to be ordained but when I stopped to be nun, there was no big feeling about it because I returned to my family. I didn’t have any serious thoughts about it (Pelagie, pers. comm. 2003).

According to Sister Levasseur (pers. comm. 2004) she always worked hard, cleaning, washing, and visiting the Inuit women around the mission. She also recalled that she would sometimes do the reverse of what she was told to do, but the other sisters adapted to this. Pelagie felt uncomfortable with praying and singing in French, and that may have played an important role in her decision to leave the order. Just

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<sup>15</sup> Leonard Putulik in Michaud (2004).

<sup>16</sup> Leonie Putulik in Michaud (2004).

before she left, Sister Levasseur (pers. comm. 2004) recalled meeting Pelagie crying in the kitchen and stating, “All the nuns here think I can pray like them but I am not able. [...] I can’t stay here.” Pelagie continued to help the Nuns and the priests. Even after her late marriage, she remained involved in church activities and continued to visit Inuit in hospitals. When we met her in her house in Arviat, she commented about this hard work,

I remember that the Nuns worked very, very hard. They would wake up early in the morning to work hard. For all the nuns, we would get up at 5h30 and have a prayer meeting. Then, after 8h00 we would work hard until after the night. At that time, the sick people would be located upstairs and the handicapped ones and others would be downstairs. Orphans would also be downstairs (Pelagie, pers. comm. 2005).

She recalled that she made a big statue:

I made this big statue with the help of other men with clay. It was given to Father Ducharme and when he died, it was given back to me. This is a sign that I helped the Nuns. This statue is a copy of an old one that was brought here in 1947 (Pelagie, pers. comm. 2005).

## Conclusion

Despite the high hopes expressed by the priests and the Grey Nuns, only one Inuk—Sister Pelagie Inuk—became a Grey Nun. Ordained in 1956, she spent 24 years with the Grey Nuns; from her postulate in 1946 to her departure from the Order in 1970. Pelagie, like all Inuit women who aspired to become nuns, finally opted for a married life. Indeed, the Roman Catholic institution of celibacy does not seem to fit well into Inuit culture. No Inuk man has ever become an Oblate priest. In this respect the Roman Catholic Church contrasts sharply with the Anglican Church, where for more than a century Inuit have been appointed as pastors, ministers, and even bishops. As Louis Tapardjuk explained:

Inuit are not in the habit of being alone. It’s not their custom to not have a family. Family comes first. You need a wife to look after your needs, such as your *kamiit* and everything else. Often Anglican ministers had families, but Roman Catholic priests, never. There was no way an Inuk would become a priest unless the Vatican changed its rules and allowed priests to get married. (Tapardjuk 2014: 46).

As a consequence, the Catholic Church always remained dependent upon non-Inuit for recruitment of its professionals. Though training to become a Grey Nun for 10 years, Pelagie was a nun for only 14 years, leaving the Order to become a married woman. This was also the choice of other candidates who tried to follow her. The Inuit who knew Pelagie are positive about the choices she made, but they know things would have been much easier if celibacy had been less strict.

The missionaries reasoned that shamanism and Christianity were incompatible, and therefore did everything they could to suppress shamanism. However, shamanism did



not disappear, but “went underground” and shamanic practices were often continued (see Remie 1983). Whereas the Oblates and the Grey Nuns would never resort to shamanism, Roman Catholic Inuit might integrate shamanic practices into their Christian perspective. The logic of shamanism might often still operate within a Christian context, as illustrated by Pelagie attaching an object to a shaman’s belt so that her wish to become a nun be fulfilled.

Inuit women such as Pelagie played a key role in the development of Roman Catholicism in the North. The importance of their contribution can be compared to that of the Inuit women at the Anglican Mission of Blacklead Island (Baffin Island) in the late 1890s. Inuit women were often among the first converts, and they inspired many others to follow them (Laugrand et al. 2006). Women accepted Christian values and rules before men did, seeing Christianity as a form of liberation from the old rules of abstaining and refraining they had to observe (see Atuat’s account quoted in Laugrand 2002: 462).

Inuit value survival, and they know people need each other to survive. A woman needs a man to hunt and provide food for her, and a man needs a woman to cook the food for him and prepare and sew the skins for his clothing. Together they will bring forth children who will support them when they get old. These traditional values were deeply embedded in Inuit society, and Christianity did not change them. As members of society, Inuit women were supposed to marry and have children. By becoming a nun, Pelagie managed to escape marriage temporarily but this kind of life could not last. Remaining a nun implied keeping a distance from your family and living like a Qallunaaq among Qallunaat. That was hard to do. A person can become lonely despite living among people. It may have become even more difficult for Pelagie when her Inuit friends decided that they would not pursue their vocation, and she realized that she would be the only Inuk nun. Pelagie did not wish to talk about her motives for leaving the Order, but we may speculate that the gap between the celibate life of a nun and the social life of an Inuk woman was too wide to maintain indefinitely.

Missionaries are often described as agents of change who can control their parishioners and their practices. Indigenous nuns seem to have acted differently. Being aware of the distance they had to cross when they converted, once initiated, they tended to become cultural mediators. At the Chesterfield Inlet residential school, where Pelagie worked, she is well remembered as a nun who was different from her fellow nuns. She could adapt better than the others, and could understand the children. Once she left the Order, she continued her work in the hospitals as a married woman, and the Inuit continued to respect her. Pelagie’s story reminds us of the strength of Inuit social values. When Inuit embraced Christianity, they did not give up fundamental Inuit social values that show great resilience and provide Inuit women with little scope to escape their destiny as wives and mothers.

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