

SPIRITS ACROSS THE ARCTIC: SELECTED DRAWINGS COLLECTED BY KNUD RASMUSSEN IN NOME, 1924

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ABSTRACT

At the very end of his Fifth Thule Expedition, Knud Rasmussen happened to meet a group of Nuniwarmiut—people of Nunivak Island—in Nome. He did not understand their Cup'ig dialect, but they agreed to make drawings of their culture, and Paul Ivanoff, an Inupiaq-Russian trader stationed on Nunivak Island, was engaged to translate their commentaries. Rasmussen was under the impression that the Nuniwarmiut had been completely isolated from any outside influences, so he felt sure that he had found his grail—knowledge of an unspoiled “Eskimo” culture. While some Christian influence may in fact be discernible, information shared by the Nuniwarmiut in Nome provides a unique view into their cosmology. Characteristics of several Nunivak spirits can be followed across the Arctic, as shown by two selected examples, the Sand Hopper and the Bearded Seal.

INTRODUCTION

On the last day of August 1924, when the Danish explorer Knud Rasmussen reached the end of his Fifth Thule Expedition in Nome, he was introduced to the Lomen family, the local trading dynasty. One of their traders, Paul Ivanoff, who had been posted on Nunivak Island since October 1920, was in Nome with a group of Nuniwarmiut who had been called to court as witnesses against Nayagnir, one of their shamans (Pratt, *this issue*). Ivanoff arranged for Rasmussen to meet and work with these islanders from the far south, and for once Rasmussen needed an interpreter. Fluent in West Greenlandic and not least in the Inughuit dialect of far northern Greenland,¹ Rasmussen had throughout the expedition been able to communicate with Canadian Inuit and Alaskan Iñupiat right up to Nome.² But the Cup'ig spoken by the Nuniwarmiut was beyond his competency. Paul Ivanoff spoke Inupiaq and some English, and after nearly four years on Nunivak trading with the Nuniwarmiut, he had a working knowledge of Cup'ig; he served Rasmussen as well as he could.³

With his intense focus on pre-Christian Inuit religion, Rasmussen welcomed the cooperation of the Nunivak Islanders as a rare gift. At that point, the islanders had not been baptized, and their culture remained largely traditional. Since painting images of amulet-animals and hunting scenes on personal belongings was part of their heritage, Rasmussen asked them to draw their culture. Six of them agreed to do so. They depicted their annual round of hunting, collecting, and domestic life, and drew vivid and unique portraits of their spirits and spirit masks. Five of the artists were later identified by the late anthropologist Margaret Lantis as the elders Naryartur, Aguyal'ug, and Pugta'ur and the younger Iralur and Nayirer (see Pratt, *this issue*). Lantis was unable to identify the last artist, Cuukar (M. Lantis, pers. comm., 28 November 1978; Sonne 1988a:27–28).⁴ Nayagnir, who was eventually released from jail because the Nuniwarmiut dared say nothing against him in court, added to the commentaries and offered Rasmussen an interview (Rasmussen n.d.).

Rasmussen brought the drawings home with him and commissioned a collection of carved wooden masks and dancing trays, which arrived in Denmark the following year. Considering Rasmussen's enthusiasm for his collaboration with the Nuniwarmiut, it is unfortunate that he was unable to produce a complete publication about the collections he made, including the drawings, masks, and notes. Rasmussen published a number of expedition reports and two popular overviews, *Fra Grønland til Stillehavet* (1925–1926) in Danish and the shorter *Across Arctic America* ([1927] 1999) in English. But in 1933 grim fate decided his untimely death, with the Nunivak work left unfinished.

After Rasmussen's death, the carved masks and the drawings were transferred to the National Museum of Denmark, but Rasmussen's notes were apparently lost.⁵ When some 50 years later I discovered the missing notes, the late Jørgen Meldgaard, curator at the National Museum of Denmark, asked me to edit a publication. Due to the generosity of the Danish publishing firm Gyldendal, the Nunivak material came out as a beautifully illustrated book, *Agayut: Nunivak Eskimo Masks and Drawings from the 5th Thule Expedition, 1921–24, Collected by Knud Rasmussen*, which provides a coda to the expedition's extensive publication series (Sonne 1988a).⁶

The absence of a full report from Rasmussen's hand is unfortunate for another reason. It might have revealed to what extent he trusted Ivanoff's translations, which may be questioned (e.g., Ann Fienup-Riordan, pers. comm., 17 October 1988; Pratt 2009:132–137; Pratt, *this issue*). However, Rasmussen expressed no doubt on this point in his published books: "I understood his [Ivanoff's] speech [i.e., Inupiaq] without slightest difficulty, while he also spoke the southern dialect, which is more or less the same throughout the whole range of country down to Kuskokwim and Bristol Bay" (Rasmussen 1999:349; 1925–1926, II:368).⁷ By this Rasmussen indicated his understanding that Ivanoff had adequate knowledge of the Cup'ig language of Nunivak Island, which lies west of the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta and north of Bristol Bay.

For my part, I have placed cautious trust in Ivanoff's translations but noted in my earlier work (Sonne 1988a) that some of the religious ideas and mask commentaries offered by the Nuniwarmiut came through with a Christian flavor (see also Lee 2000). I discuss below a hierarchy of spirits subordinated to a higher spirit that is analogous in some ways to the Roman Catholic or Russian Orthodox creed of Maria and the holy saints

under a Christian God. Possibly this was a distortion introduced by Ivanoff, who had Russian heritage, although he was raised in the Protestant beliefs of his father, a missionary of the Swedish Evangelical Church, which recognizes no such hierarchy.

We may also consider missionary efforts by the Russian Orthodox Church in southwest Alaska during the latter half of the nineteenth century and the syncretic combination of Orthodox and Yup'ik beliefs that resulted (Black 1984). The Yupiit came to understand the Orthodox mass in terms of their own masked ceremonies, as reflected in Yup'ik terminology: God was called *agayun*, to pray *agayu-*, and a minister or priest *agayulirta*, the latter word also designating a shaman in his function of directing the carving of masks and the composing of songs for ceremonies (Fienup-Riordan 1996; Hinz [1944] 1955:141; Sonne 1988a:34). Rasmussen himself was convinced that Nunivak Island (and, in the Danish original, the opposite mainland as well) had remained completely insulated from such external influences, both before and after the U.S. purchase of Alaska from the Russians in 1867 (Rasmussen [1927] 1999:349; 1925–1926, II:368–369). Yet the purported isolation of Nunivak Island was less than complete, according to biographies collected by Margaret Lantis in 1947. These give evidence of Nuniwarmiut trading voyages to the Kuskokwim River; a Nunivak shaman's extended stay with his family for more than eight years at the Russian trading post at St. Michael in Norton Sound; and Nunivak relations with families on Nelson Island, with whom Nuniwarmiut celebrated Messenger Feasts, wearing masks and performing rituals similar to those on Nunivak (Lantis 1960:65, 67, 69, 113–127).

Dorothy Jean Ray (1967) also pointed out that large wooden masks were a fairly late development in the Yup'ik region and that mask styles spread rapidly between communities. Mask carving was facilitated by the introduction of iron knives during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, replacing earlier and less adequate tools, and dogsleds facilitated long-distance travel and the movement of masks, trade goods, and people between villages during the ceremonial season. For instance, the Nelson Island shaman Apaguk/Apa'gakh performed with masks at Nunivak (Lantis 1960:118) and at other places all along the coast from Nelson Island north to St. Michael (Ray 1967). On this basis, I supposed when editing *Agayut* that Russian Orthodox icons displayed in village chapels during the late nineteenth century

might have influenced the iconography of Yup'ik and Cup'ig masks, and even compared the hoops that encircle them to halos. I further proposed that the hierarchy of "strong" and "weak" Nunivak mask spirits described by Rasmussen might have been influenced by Orthodox beliefs (Sonne 1988a:120–132).

Today, thirty years after *Agayut* appeared, I realize that interpreting the masks and commentaries in an Orthodox frame was far-fetched. In particular, it is now well understood that the hoops around masks are a pre-Christian motif that represents concentric levels of the universe, similar to the *ellanguaq* ("pretend universe") constructed in Yup'ik ceremonial houses (Fienup-Riordan 1996). I have also settled on a new explanation for the hierarchy of some spirits described in the commentaries, and this topic is worth reconsidering since it was at the core of Rasmussen's conclusions about the roots of Inuit/Yup'ik religion.

A HIERARCHY OF SPIRITS⁸

Masks were donned by shamans and ordinary people during rituals to appeal for animals, hunting success, and good health. In Rasmussen's notes, he makes a distinction between "A" and "B" categories of masks (Sonne 1988a:77–99). They are differentiated by three criteria: location used (outdoors or indoors), strength (strong or weak) of the represented spirit, and personal status (shaman or ordinary person) of the wearer. Masks of class "A" were strong and used outside the *kiyaa* (Cup'ig, communal men's house) by shamans, while "B" masks were weaker and worn inside by either shamans or ordinary people. Rasmussen wrote that "a strong mask should have large space—the universe itself," while a weak one required only a "small space" enclosed by the *kiiya* (Sonne 1988a:158, 330–331).

These rules apply more or less throughout the commentaries to the mask drawings, but the concept of a spiritual hierarchy is explicit in two instances. About two masks drawn by Nayagnir ("Najagneq"), Rasmussen noted (rather cryptically) that "No 20 (A) stands o [over?] the mighty *tunardluk* [evil helping spirit] in the sea" and "No 23 (B) is mediator to the real 'power' spirits" (Sonne 1988a:333, translated by B. Sonne). Regarding five masks drawn by Iralur, four belonged to Rasmussen's "B" class (Nos. 10–13) and were subordinate to a single "A" mask (No. 9) (Sonne 1988a:157–159). According to the commentary, two of the "B" masks were useful for

getting land animals (Nos. 10 and 11) and two for animals of the sea (Nos. 12 and 13), but none would have any effect except through the power of the stronger "A" mask. Such a hierarchy sounds peculiar insofar as, according to Hans Himmelheber's (2000:150) information, the Nuniwarmiut helping spirits were not mutually related. Similarly, Edward Nelson visited the Russian Congregation in 1873 at Ikogmiut, which held ideas of stronger and weaker helping spirits subordinated to a single great spirit, and was convinced that this superior helping spirit was copied from Christianity. The local Yup'ik called it *Tun'-rúñ-ai'-yuk*, that is, the chief of the shamans' helping spirits, *tuunrat*. They differed in strength but only in ways humans do, and no mention was made of a hierarchy between them (Nelson 1899:427–428).

Nonetheless, it appears that the five masks played this type of coordinated role in a ritual that took place as part of the Messenger Feast (Yup'ik *Kevgiq* or *Kevgiryaraq*), a winter festival during which guests invited from another village would compete with their hosts in the provision of gifts and food and in athletic contests (Curtis 1930; Fienup-Riordan 1994, 1996; Lantis 1946:188–192; Sonne 1988a:64–69) (Figs. 1 and 2). The "A" mask (No. 9) depicts a wolf, whose hunting skills on both the land and the sea (presumably in its alternative form as a killer whale) were requested during the ceremony (Nelson 1899:444). In the commentary, the wolf is represented as a dot at the center of three concentric rings stretched on radial rods. The rings represent the entire universe (*ellanguar* [Amos and Amos 2003:106]), heaven and earth, watched by the wolf from the center. The associated prayer song (Sonne 1988a:158) is directed to "thla—ñguamâ" ("*thlanguama*"), or "all of ours universe" [our pretend *Ella*]. It was used at the full moon in December by the whole community to ask for all kinds of game, whether of the sea or the land (Sonne 1988a:157–158).

As phonological equivalents, *Ella* is Cup'ig for Yup'ik *Cella* and Inuit *Sila* (Fortescue et al. 1994:78, 499 [protoform *cila*]). On a wider scale the *ellanguaq* of a Yup'ik ceremony was a model of the universe suspended from the *qasgiq* ceiling and moved by cords at intervals to the excitement of the participants. Himmelheber observed one in a 1936 Bladder Feast on Nunivak (Fienup-Riordan 1996:125–127). But the commentary to Iralur's wolf *ellanguar* points to a Messenger Feast because two of the subordinate "B" masks (Nos. 10 and 11) were first to be tested by two shamans, one from each village. They met midway between the villages, donned the masks,

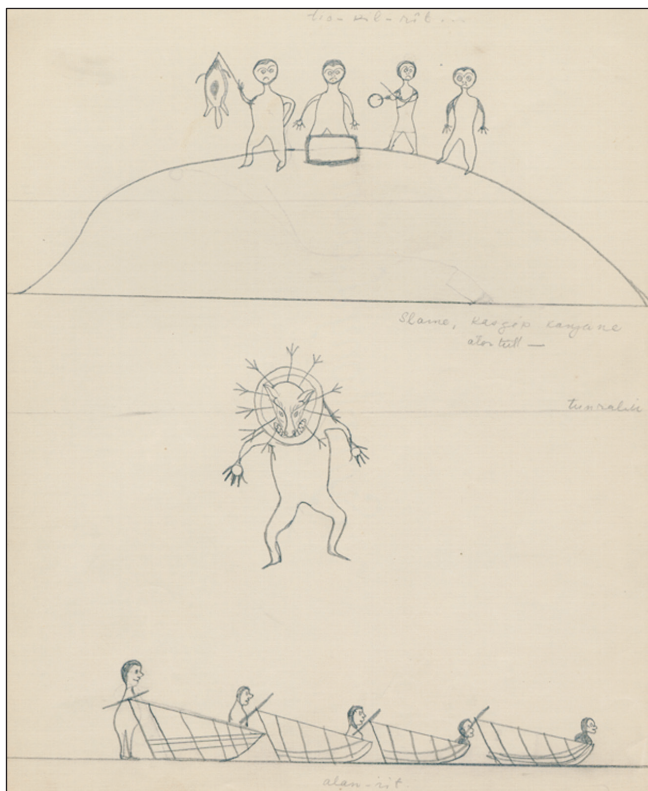


Figure 1: Top: Welcome of guests at a Messenger Feast on Nunivak Island (Sonne 1988a: Fig. 63). Middle: A dancer performing in a Wolf mask (Rasmussen's type "A"); "strong" masks of this kind "should have a large space—the universe itself" and were worn outdoors by shamans. Bottom: The arrival of guests with sleds. Pencil on paper; drawn by Iralur. Courtesy of the National Museum of Denmark, Copenhagen.

went into trance and then up to the sky. The spirit who gave the most was used at the feast (Sonne 1988a:158).⁹ The decision about which spirit was the most generous was up to the two shamans, according to Himmelheber, who was told that the competition took place right outside the *kiiya* at the beginning of the Messenger Feast: "The two shamans place themselves opposite each other in front of the men's house and command their *dunnerat* [*tuunrat*] to fight with each other. Afterwards, the result is proclaimed in the men's house" (Himmelheber 2000:157). A similar competition was once witnessed by Himmelheber's main informant on religion, the shaman Kangleq. One shaman flapped his arms to send the other first to the world below and next to the heavens (Lantis 1960:121–122).

Do these shamanic competitions at Messenger Feasts suggest the concept of a spiritual hierarchy? Indeed they do—Iralur's commentary on the dominant wolf mask

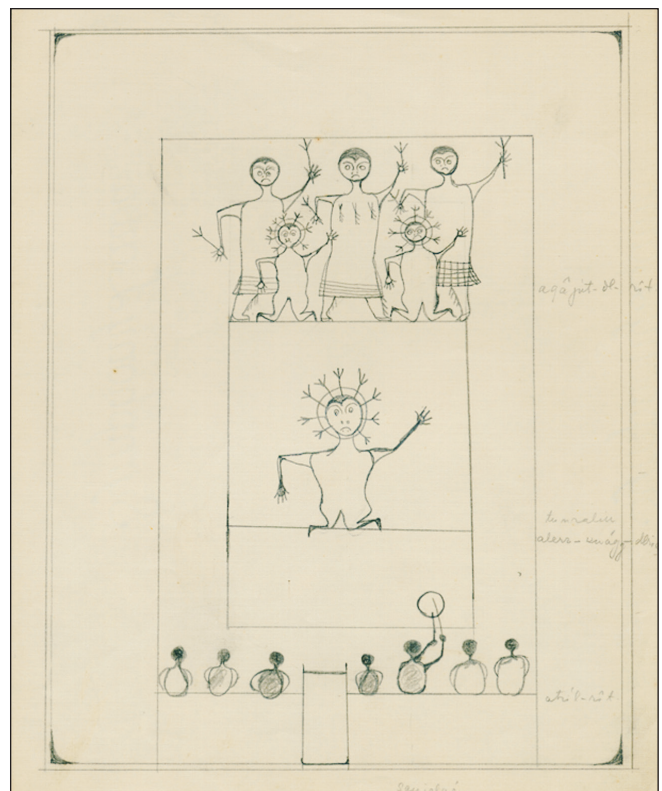


Figure 2: A Messenger Feast dance inside a *kiyaa* (men's ceremonial house) on Nunivak Island (Sonne 1988a: Fig. 64). "Weak" masks (Rasmussen's type "B"), shown here, were worn by both shamans and ordinary people during indoor ceremonies. Pencil on paper; drawn by Iralur. Courtesy of the Danish National Museum, Copenhagen.

(No. 9) states that all *tuunrat* (shamans' helping spirits) stem from a superior *tuunraq* who lives at a great distance up in the air and is described in ways reminiscent of the Christian God (Sonne 1988a:157, Fig. 111). *Sla* (*Ella*, *Ellam Cua*) is characterized by similar words in Rasmussen's interview with Nayagnir (Rasmussen n.d.:175; Sonne 1988a:115–120). Both indicated that *Ella* speaks with a roaring voice in bad weather when:

humans misuse the earth's—animals good things—disrespect 'their daily bread'—which should be kept holy as their prerequisite for Life—and existence [but then he] withdraws into his own endless nothingness, apart . . . No one has seen *Sila* [*Ella*]; his place of being is a mystery, in that he is at once among us and unspeakably far away. (Rasmussen [1927] 1999:386; n.d.:177–179; translation by B. Sonne)

These words could, admittedly, be Ivanoff's additions and copied in the commentary, but Rasmussen revealed no suspicion of this in his writings. He took the words to be Nayagnir's and found reason to state that his mysterious *Ella* and the phonological equivalent *Sila*—the *inua* (person, owner) of weather from East Greenland to Northwest Alaska—were one and the same and constituted the unspoiled root of Yup'ik/Inuit religion (Rasmussen 1925–1926, II:404–405; [1927] 1999:386).

RASMUSSEN'S *SILA*

To uncover common precontact Inuit spiritual beliefs across the Arctic was one of Rasmussen's strongest aspirations for the Fifth Thule Expedition (see Crowell, *this issue*). In his own view, this desire was fulfilled by the knowledge gained from the Nuniwarmiut, and from Nayagnir in particular. Rasmussen, who trusted Ivanoff's translation of Nayagnir's ideas about *Ella*, had heard similar Christian-colored notions of *Sila* as expressed by the shaman Igjugaarjuk among Caribou Inuit in Arctic Canada (Rasmussen 1930:49–52). The potential of Christian influence on Igjugaarjuk's concept is hard to deny,¹⁰ but Rasmussen nevertheless proposed that Igjugaarjuk's notion of *Sila* was the core belief of Inuit/Yupiit religion. He based this conviction on Kaj Birket-Smith's theory that the Caribou Inuit culture represented the original stem from which all Inuit peoples descended, accounting for the common elements of their belief system (Birket-Smith 1929; see also Rasmussen [1927] 1999:87–88). But because this origin theory has been proven wrong (Burch 1978; Sonne 1986:107; 1988b:23), some broader comparative discussion of *Sila* is appropriate. Canadian and Greenlandic sources—none Christian-influenced—suggest less ethereal notions of *Sila* than Nayagnir's *Ellam Cua*, as the *inua* (owner/life/character) of powerful, unpredictable weather (Sonne 1988a). *Sila* is variously depicted as a giant baby, screaming, farting, and pissing beyond any parental control and accessible to powerful shamans, who manage to bind his flapping napkin (Saladin d'Anglure 1986); as a giant of the interior Greenland ice exhaling cold winds in winter and farting warm winds in summer (N. Egede [1741] 1971:65); and as the bisexual Entrail Snatcher (*Nalikkatteeq*, Big Crotch) represented in ritual (e.g., J. Rosing 1957:242), who tore out the lungs of deceased humans going to heaven and

threatened to overturn the pillar supporting the sky (Sonne 2017).

This being said about Rasmussen's broader understanding of *Sila/Ella*, and setting aside the possibility that the actual Nuniwarmiut concept was influenced by Christianity or that it was altered in translation by Ivanoff, the collections and information acquired from the Nuniwarmiut in Nome nonetheless richly portray a living southern Inuit/Yupiit culture in full possession of its worldview, ceremonies, cultural values, and spiritual practices, including the intervention of shamans with controlling spirits. Among the unique mask drawings and associated commentaries are several that offer sufficient detail to invite comparisons across the Arctic.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: THE GIANT SAND HOPPER AND THE BEARDED SEAL

Comparisons of Inuit/Yupiit culture across the Arctic have a long history, shifting from an emphasis on material culture to social anthropology in the 1970s. In subsequent decades, comparisons of belief systems and worldview among Inuit peoples have regained the prominence that Rasmussen afforded them, improved by growing knowledge about the common cultural roots and differing developments among these societies (Sonne 2017).

My main focus is on comparing symbolic meanings in ritual, myth, and metaphors, which takes in everyday practice and social matters as well. Essentially, it is identical to the anthropological field study as presented by Jarich Oosten (2006), with the basic supposition that “inside the region the data become mutually interpretative.” To this I add an ethnohistorical dimension referring to available knowledge about social and historical context (Sonne 2017:14).

The spirit figures chosen for analysis are the Giant Sand Hopper, whose mythology also involves Raven, and the Bearded Seal. All three have their counterparts in actual animals, whose prominent characteristics, as recognized by both Inuit/Yupiit and Western scientists, are significantly emphasized and magnified in their spirit counterparts. In addition, aspects of these animals intersect with practical culture, including the pan-Arctic use of bearded seal skin for boot soles. Both kinds of characteristics serve as governing ideas for my analyses—different but, as shown below, comparable.

OUTDOOR VS. INDOOR

Moving east across the Arctic, the Inuit did not consider the shamans' spirits to be mutually related or subordinated to a higher power. Among the Inuit, *Sila* and its Yupik phonological equivalents mean the outdoors in opposition to indoors (Fortescue et al. 1994:78). Accordingly, the commentary to Rasmussen's "B" mask No. 10 states: "A strong mask should have large space—the universe itself—a weak one 'small space', the inside of *qasgē*" (Sonne 1988a:158).

In Greenland and Canada, certain shamans' helping spirits were also relegated to the external realms of sky and ocean. Thus, during a Greenlandic shaman's séance, most of his helping spirits were invited into the darkened room, but some were absolutely to remain outdoors (see H. Egede [1738–1741] 1925:57; Glahn 1771:345; Graah [1832] 1932:134; Holm 1888:22; Kleinschmidt 1871:370–371; J. Rosing 1963:180; Sonne 1986; Thalbitzer 1926:22–23; Victor and Robert-Lamblin 1989–1993, II:244). These included the Greenland oracle spirits or *toornaarsuit* (pl. of *toornaarsuk*, from *toornaq*, "helper," and *-arsuk*, "special," the former related to Yup'ik *tuunraq*) (Sonne 1986, 2017); the *appeqqiteq*, a beach spirit who mediated the shaman's questions to the *toornaarsuk*; and the Sand Hopper (Holm 1888:22).¹¹ Notably, species that were *toornaarsuit* in East Greenland¹² did not belong in space or the open air but in the deep sea. They included two gastropods, the black wing snail and white wing snail—which use feet that have been evolutionarily repurposed as "wings" to "fly" through the water (Thalbitzer 1928:378)—and two demersal spirits, the redfish (*Sebastes mentella*) and grenadier (Macrouridae, species undetermined) (J. Rosing 1963:180). Why shamans summoned the Sand Hopper is not known, but its parallel role as a helping spirit on Nunivak Island is discussed below.

Finally ravens, whether spirits or real, were strictly outdoor beings. People of East Greenland told of the paralyzing fear that a raven caused if it came into the entrance tunnel of a house, because once inside the living room it could puff out its feathers and suffocate the residents (Ostermann 1938:168; Victor and Robert-Lamblin 1989–1993, II:384). In my interpretation, there is too much *Sila* in Raven, too much (suffocating) outdoor air. Actually, the black wing snail (*Clione limacina*), an "outdoor" *toornaarsuk*, has a similar effect. A fish that eats one is said to explode; and a seal that consumes a snail must lie still for a long while, waiting for the snail to be dis-

solved by stomach acid. Appropriately, this snail is called by some *qaartulajik* (West Greenlandic), the "explosive,"¹³ whereas another name, *tulukassaq* (West Greenlandic), "raven-like," refers to its color and origin, according to the Inughuit (Polar Inuit). It came about when Raven was married to a goose but could not manage their migratory flight across the sea. Exhausted, Raven fell and was drowned, sinking to the bottom of the sea, where he dissolved into many small, water-flying *tulukassat* (Sonne 2005:ID 1405). A similar idea was expressed by an East Greenlandic shaman who claimed to have conversed with Raven under the sea (Sonne 2005:ID 1524).

KINGUG, THE GIANT SAND HOPPER

As drawn and described by Iralur, the Nunivak Giant Sand Hopper, *Kingug* (Amos and Amos 2003:172), is a very large being with hands and a long trunk, by the tip of which it inhales air just above the surface; sometimes it is seen on land (Sonne 1988a:164–165, 337) (Fig. 3). In actual life the sand hopper is an amphipod (genus *Gammarus*) that lives in shallow waters, but when left on the beach by the outgoing tide it can be seen "hopping" around, propelling itself into the air. The Nunivak sha-

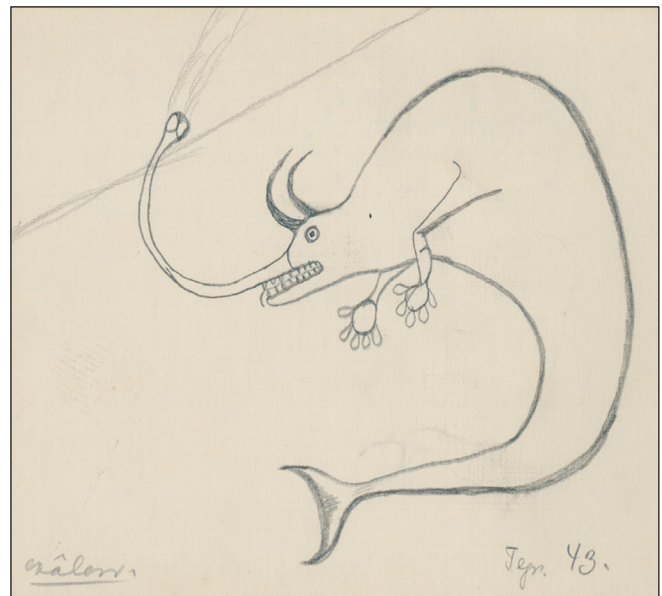


Figure 3: *Kingug*, the Giant Sand Hopper, a dangerous helping spirit owned by the shaman Kapooran of Nunivak Island (Sonne 1988a: Fig. 120). *Kingug* is shown with hands, forked tail, and a long trunk used to inhale air above the surface of the water. Pencil on paper; drawn by Iralur. Courtesy of the Danish National Museum, Copenhagen.

man Kapooran owned this spirit and with its aid killed Iralur's two sisters, leading Iralur to attempt vengeance (Sonne 1988a:164–165). But when Iralur aimed his gun, Kapooran instead let himself be devoured by the monster. At that point Iralur had to give up, because anyone who shoots at the Giant Sand Hopper will be killed by “the recoiling of the weapon”: that is, the rebound of the bullet, like a boomerang. *Kingug* is explicitly said to be a “holy being” and white all over. Its color may be a symbol of its sacredness, or refer to the danger of attempting sorcery on a being that is so magically strong, as experienced by Uniagaq below (see also Sonne 2017:44; 2019).

The Greenland sand hopper, named *Kinguk* (the phonological equivalent in West Greenlandic of *Kingug*), was an equally dangerous spirit and similarly holy, namely, in the (Durkheimian) sense of being kept apart.¹⁴ When summoned by a shaman, it came bouncing along, growing to the size of an *umiaq*. The shaman called it from a house that was buttressed with long tent poles sticking out through the entrance to prevent the spirit from getting inside (J. Rosing 1963:180–181; O. Rosing 1957–1961:83). Its color was not mentioned, but the way it moved was emphasized by its East Greenland name, *napalariaq*, the “somersaulting one.” As mentioned above, we do not know why the *napalariaq* was summoned to a séance, but we are told that it was owned as a helping spirit by the shaman Naaja's wife, who managed by “spirit fishing” (*qilaneq*) to have it lure a polar bear into shooting range, thus saving people from starvation. Its *umiaq*-like specter was seen next to the dead bear (Sonne 2005:ID 1200).

RAVEN AND SOMERSAULT

Like the ritual of walking or running in a circle to follow the “way of the world” (*Ella maliggluku* in Yup'ik, *Sila malillugu* in Inuktitut [Fienup-Riordan 1994; Petersen 1966/67:262; Saladin d'Anglure 1986]), the somersault brings renewal and regeneration. Both movements were performed at the very end of the Nunivak Bladder Feast, the annual winter celebration of animals and birds that had been killed during the preceding year. First, the men and boys tumbled head over heels across the floor of the *kiiya* from the entrance to the rear wall. Then, in order from the youngest to the oldest, they took turns racing around the entrance hole (Lantis 1946:186–187). I take the meaning of these movements to be about the return of animals to a renewed world, with analogies in two Nunivak myths. One tells about a man who visited the

seals in their underwater home to save his village from starvation. He was instructed by the seals to somersault thrice on his way back to the village in order to bring a whale along, and he did so with the promised result (Lantis 1946:288). The other story goes back to mythic time, when the Nuniarmiut, encouraged by Mink, used to renew their lives by rolling headfirst down a hillside. But finally Raven asked Mink to stop this nonsense. He caught a crab, buried the creature close to the village, put up two sticks in a cross, pretended to weep, and told the disappointed Mink that the village looked much nicer. From that day on people began to die (Lantis 1946:297).¹⁵

In Greenlandic traditions coastal dwarves also renewed their lives by rolling downhill, but they could only do so five times. A sixth attempt would not work, and not because Raven intervened: the dwarves simply had no more lives to use. Yet the dwarves were clearly alter egos of ravens, which are known as somersaulting acrobats along the steep coastal cliffs. Moreover, the dwarves were as thievish and unable to catch seals as ravens; they were attracted to humans like ravens; and they were as filthy as ravens, with the exception of their shamans. The dwarf shamans were clean and as white as primordial Raven before Loon spilled soot all over his body (see “Raven” in Sonne 2017).¹⁶ Figuratively, a similar cleanliness was demanded of human shamans, who by keeping their particular strict taboos obtained access to sacred beings and other worlds.

Beyond this, the very world turns around. The southeastern Baffin Islanders were convinced that the earth made a somersault twice a year, at the vernal and autumnal equinoxes; perhaps the extremely high tides at those times in Arctic latitudes suggested this idea. At those turning points in the annual cycle, a shaman in the guise of a raven (*Nunagiqsaqtut*) dressed himself in straps of bearded seal skin and figuratively cleansed the earth, renewing hunting by mediating peoples' confessions about breaking taboos to Sea Woman (Sedna), the Inuit mother of sea mammals (Bilby 1923:222; Boas 1901–1907:141–142; Laugrand and Oosten 2015; Sonne 2017, 2019).

The Greenlanders believed that in primordial times the earth turned around once. In a particularly rich East Greenlandic version of this myth, two orphans, Uniagaq and his younger brother, dress in seal skin bands the same way as *Nunagiqsaqtut* (Raven). They and their housemates flee into the outdoors at this disastrous turning, the brothers following the light along the bottom of the ebbing sea while their housemates go toward the mountains. Only

the brothers survive, ending up on a distant, deserted island. Seals, driftwood, and an axe wash ashore, and with these things the brothers build the frame of a kayak, after which a woman arrives with her sewing things and covers it with skins. Uniagaq trains his brother to balance himself in the kayak by means of their unwrapped clothing tied into a long band. The brother becomes an excellent hunter—the Inuit admission to marriage—and marries the woman. They all lead a happy life until Uniagaq also falls in love with the woman but is rejected; he casts a spell on her, but because of her superior “power” the spell rebounds on him and ruins his hip. The woman disappears, while hipshot Uniagaq remains an unmarried and mediocre hunter of eider ducks along the shore.

Uniagaq’s characteristics are those of Raven. Primordial Raven brought the light (the dawn), which leads Uniagaq in the right direction. Unlike his brother, he is unable to hunt seals, as ravens also cannot in real life; and just as ravens do he scavenges young seabirds, eggs, and carcasses along the shore, wobbling along as if hipshot. In the myth, he ends up at the margin of society (Laugrand and Oosten 2015; Sonne 2005:ID 1678; 2017:88, 328, 383; 2019).

In my view, Uniagaq recreates the Inuit hunting culture after the “turning around” of the earth. In this he resembles the Alaskan culture hero and creator, Raven. Laugrand and Oosten (2015) have convincingly shown that Raven had much the same role among the pre-Christian Canadian Inuit as he did in Alaska, bringing light into the world and marking transitions of space and time that guarantee the cycles of human life,¹⁷ and these findings have proven relevant for Greenland as well (Sonne 2017).

The Uniagaq story also has unusually strong parallels in Yupik/Cup’ig mythology. Take the origin of Nunivak Island, for instance, “born” as it was from a pile of earth in the lap of a heavenly woman (Lantis 1946:265–267). She is called upon by the younger of two brothers in distress at sea, marries the elder brother, and rejects the younger by pointing at him with her needle, thereby involuntarily killing him with her great power. Declaring her innocence, she returns to the sky, leaving behind her mourning husband, who transforms into the first wolf on the island (Lantis 1946:265–267). This could be the wolf of the *ellanguar*—the ceremonial model universe—in the same mythic way that Uniagaq ended up as the prototype of ravens; after a renewal of the world, he recreates the Inuit kayak hunting culture for his brother, but

for his own part remains on its margin. The woman of the Nunivak myth is identified as *Cellam Cua* by Curtis (1930:73; cf. Fienup-Riordan 1994:258) and was also said to be a woman by an informant of Himmelheber’s (2000:146). The woman of the Uniagaq story is given no name and her otherworldly place is not revealed.¹⁸

LIMINALITY AND HOLINESS

Returning now to the Nunivak Giant Sand Hopper—a being marked by its white color and ability to repel any weapon by bouncing it back on the attacker—we may interrogate the source of its spiritual power, its “holiness.” In the phenomenology of religions, holiness is an ambivalent thing, dangerous and beneficial at the same time, and in the physical world the sand hopper occupies an ambivalent *place*. In the comment to Iralur’s drawing of *Kingug*, we learn of its need to breathe through a tube, which is why it lives at the interface of water and air and is occasionally seen on the beach (Sonne 1988a:164–165), just as real sand hoppers are sometimes stranded there by the receding tide. In structural terms the beach is a liminal (ambivalent) zone between land and sea—opposite terms in a seminal Inuit dichotomy. Moreover, there is an incessant shift between water and earth as the tides rise and fall. This liminality of “both/and” and “either/or” must be the source of the Giant Sand Hopper’s holiness. The same is true for the Greenlandic Giant Sand Hopper, which in addition to its extraordinary somersaulting capacity made its spiritual home right beneath the exact meeting point of land and sea. This place marked the first, transitional step of the shaman’s journey to the realms of deceased humans and Sea Woman, way out below on the bottom of the ocean (J. Rosing 1963:277). Thus, as a liminal, ambiguous being the Sand Hopper was as dangerously holy on Nunivak as in East Greenland, just as Raven, the Yup’ik and Iñupiaq culture hero and bird of essential cosmic transition for all Inuit peoples, was in real life observed as an inhabitant of the liminal shore.

THE BEARDED SEAL

The salient characteristics of the bearded seal are that it winters beyond the ice edge, its large size, heavy weight, useful skins, and underwater mating call in early spring. On Nunivak Island the bearded seal was traditionally the most important animal—socially, culturally, economically, and in ritual. A young hunter was not recognized

as an adult until the urine bladder of his first bearded seal had been given back to the sea during the Bladder Festival, and men were ranked and honored according to the number of bearded seals they killed during the year (Lantis 1946). The skin of the bearded seal, used by Inuit and Yupiit for making boot soles, boat covers, and binding ropes, served as a primary unit of value in internal trade on Nunivak Island (Pratt 1990).

The drawings and commentaries that Rasmussen collected at Nome include a drawing of the Bearded Seal figure, *Kun'unir* (Amos and Amos 2003:178) (Fig. 4). Its long hair, boots, and mittens point to the useful objects made from its hairy skin and explicitly symbolize the reciprocal relationship between bearded seals and humans (Sonne 1988a:109, 337–338). In another, the mythic Bearded Seal appears in the guise of *Itqirrpak* (Yupik), a threatening, scary being that terrified small children at the Bladder Feasts on Nunivak, just as on New Year celebrations in Canada and Greenland (Sonne 2017:354–359; 2019). In myth, *Itqirrpak* appears as a strong light on the horizon, attracted by noisy children who have been left alone. Because the children have disregarded parental warnings to be quiet, *Itqirrpak* comes into the house and kills them all. Seeking revenge, the adults lure the seal into returning by making noise, then scald it to death with boiling water as it emerges from the entrance tunnel into the living room of the house. Its name means

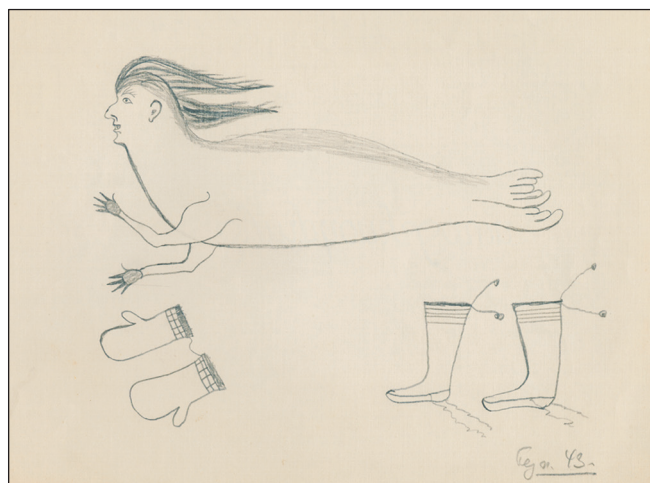


Figure 4: *Kun'unir*, the long-haired Bearded Seal spirit, whose skin is used for making mittens and boots. Drawings of these articles symbolize the grateful relationship of people toward the bearded seal (Sonne 1988a: Fig. 47). Pencil on paper; drawn by an anonymous Nunivak artist for Rasmussen in Nome. Courtesy of the Danish National Museum, Copenhagen.

“Big Fire” in both Yup’ik (*Itqirrpak*) and Greenlandic (*Innersuaq*) (Fienup-Riordan 1994:85, 146–147; Sonne 2005:ID 1529; 2019).

The real bearded seal is the first type of seal to arrive in spring, loudly announced by the males’ underwater mating calls, which hunters can hear transmitted through paddles dipped in the sea. In East Greenland this figure could, as a helping spirit, be called upon by a shaman to save an *umiaq* caught in the ice. It arrived with a thundering noise and broke a lane in front of the *umiaq* right to the beach, a veritable ice-breaker (Andreassen 1961)!

This characteristic of being a strong surface-breaker is emphasized in the Nunivak story about the origin of the bearded seal. As told in the Nome commentary to the mask called *Maklakuaq*, the bearded seal used to be a big stone on the distant bottom of the sea, where he saw seals pass by and was struck with an intense yearning to be like them (Fig. 5). Through the strength of this desire, he first grew a face, then limbs, then hair all over his body, and finally he shot up and broke the surface of the sea and swam with the others (Sonne 1988a:47, 164–165 42). On either side of the *Maklakuaq* mask are drawn the other seals that caught his fancy. Indeed, the bearded seal is like

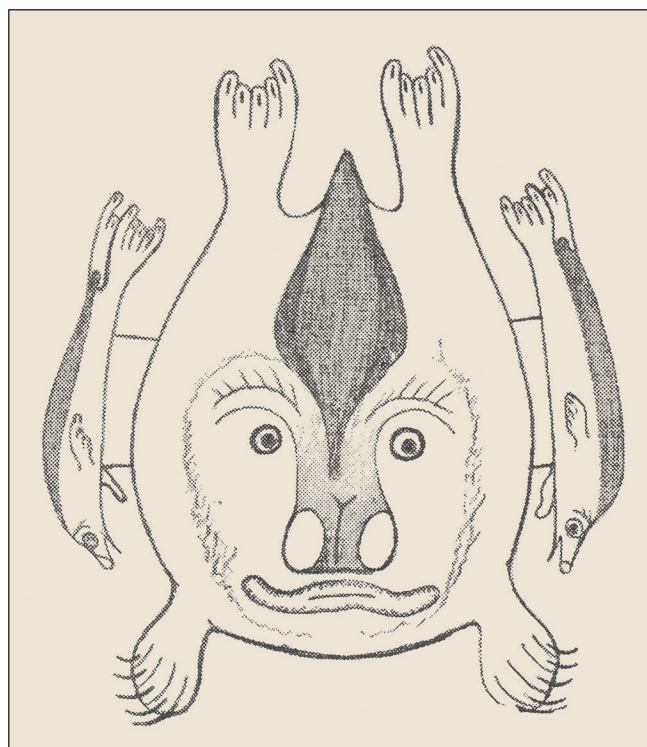


Figure 5: *Maklakuaq*, the stone spirit who turned into the first bearded seal in the world (Sonne 1988a: Fig. 17). Pencil on paper; Nunivak artist unknown. Nunivak. Courtesy of the Danish National Museum, Copenhagen.

a stone in being the biggest and heaviest species among the seals. It returns in winter to the distant sea and, as the first to arrive in spring, brings along the others. Its heavy, stony origin is echoed in the way it penetrates the surface for its very first breath—its *birth*, as it were, into this world—by a force comparable to that of the ice-breaking helping spirit in East Greenland.

Naturally, the male bearded seal's mating call lends it a libidinous character marked, for instance, by an East Greenlandic *uaajeertoq*, a masked dancer at winter festivities celebrating the New Year—which among Inuit cultures is announced by the first morning appearance of *aassuutit* (West Greenlandic), the twin stars Altair and Tarazed in the constellation Aquila (MacDonald 1998:44–45). Imitating the mating call, the dancer would act out the enticing and killing of a female bearded seal, then offer its skin to a woman he coveted; that is, who he would like to choose him for the following ritual exchange of wives (Thalbitzer 1923:296). Sexual connotations came to the fore also during the Nunivak Bladder Feast, when men attired as aggressive Bearded Seal figures “attacked” women in the entrance tunnel of a house, and the women screamed like they were being tickled all over. The children would get thoroughly scared as another Bearded Seal demon pretended to eat them (Lantis 1946:186; 1960:8–9, 116, 117, 148).

Such an intimate association of sex with eating, with all its pleasant and dangerous overtones, is found again in some Greenlandic versions of the *Itqirrpak/Innersuaq* myth, which ends in the creation of mussels. When the scalded seal monster lies dead in the tunnel, an elderly woman sticks to its body on her way out through the tunnel. Outside, in one version she slides her own genitals off on a big stone, and throws them into the sea, exclaiming, “Take these for mussels, mussels are tasty.” These were the first mussels on earth. In another version the woman sits down on a dunghill, which lay behind the longhouse of any (former) Greenlandic settlement. The dunghill is the home of small dangerous spirits and serves as food for ravens, who are notorious for neglecting human eating taboos. Sticking to the dunghill, she screams in pain when pulled toward an *umiaq* that is lying ready for the inhabitants to leave the place; hearing the sound of a mussel, she transforms into a mussel, which whirls its way down to the bottom of the sea (Sonne 2005:ID 1334, ID 660). Considering the mussel as metaphor for female genitalia, strong ambiguous overtones come to the fore in two ways. First, although mussels used to save lives as the only ac-

cessible food during starvation in East Greenland, they were scorned in order not to offend the seals—and worse, as the Greenlanders knew, they can be toxic. Second, a hard knock on a live slightly open mussel makes it close, telling you that eating it is safe, while a knock on the equally sensitive female genitalia will close this gate of life, meaning the end to human life on earth.

CHARACTERISTICS IN SEARCH OF MEANINGS

Besides signifying wind and weather, *Ella* and *Sila* are associated in myth with the qualities of alertness, observation, and reason, which are the basis of Inuit knowledge. Inuit knowledge, which flows from the ancient connections of people and place in the Arctic, is today increasingly acknowledged and respected by Western scientists and cooperatively shared by Inuit scholars. In a similar spirit I have tried to look beyond Western understandings of several animal species to delve into their complex meanings and associations in pan-Arctic Inuit mythology, using as my starting point the rich representations of culture, ritual, and cosmology that a group of knowledgeable Nuniwarmiut offered to Knud Rasmussen in 1924. We may conclude that Rasmussen indeed found what he sought during the Fifth Thule Expedition—an end-to-end, fundamental unity of Inuit intellectual culture from Greenland to Alaska.

NOTES

1. The Inughuit arrived in Avanersuaq, northernmost West Greenland, in the eighteenth century, when the area was unoccupied. Their dialect shows an Inuinnait (Copper Inuit) origin, and their contacts with the Greenlanders to the south were few until Knud Rasmussen established his Thule trading post in 1910 (Fortescue 1986; Gilberg 1984:590).
2. Inuit speak variations of the Inuit language, including Inuktitut (eastern Canada), Inupiatun (northern Alaska), Inuvialuktun (western Canada), and Kalaallisut (Greenland). Yupiit speak the closely related Yupik languages, including Yup'ik (southwest Alaska), Cup'ig (Nunivak Island), Sivuqaghmiistun (St. Lawrence Island), Uqazigmit (Chukotka), and Sugtestun/Alutiiq (southern Alaska coast).
3. Archaeologist Henry B. Collins, who spent two months on Nunivak in 1927, got the impression

that Ivanoff was fluent in Cup'ig. Ignorant of the language himself, Collins could hardly have assessed Ivanoff's fluency, but he did observe Ivanoff conversing easily with the Nuniwarmiut: "Paul Ivanoff... knows the dialect perfectly... can actually converse with the Nunivak people" (U.S. Congress 1939:20347–20348).

4. Naryartur is called Daniel in Lantis (1960:3–26, 160); Iralur was his wife's brother. Nayirer was the trader Matthew Larson (Sonne 1988a:27–28).
5. For details, see Sonne (1988a:17–24).
6. Rasmussen managed to publish his reports about the Iglulingmiut (Iglulik Inuit), Qairnirmiut (Caribou Inuit), Nattilingmiut (Netsilik Inuit), and Inuinnaait (Copper Inuit), whereas Hother Ostermann edited Rasmussen's notes from his stays among the Mackenzie and North Alaskan Inuit (Ostermann 1942; Ostermann and Holtved 1952; Rasmussen 1929, 1930, 1931, 1932).
7. The Cup'ig dialect of Nunivak differs considerably from the dialects on the opposite mainland (see Amos and Amos 2003; Pratt 2009:132–137). Since Rasmussen was never in the area where it was spoken, his remark about "the southern dialect" must be attributable to Paul Ivanoff.
8. When possible, Rasmussen's spellings of terms for Nuniwarmiut spirits, spirit figures, and other beings have been corrected to conform with the accepted Cup'ig orthography (i.e., Amos and Amos 2003). Terms for which the spellings could not be corrected often include Iñupiaq diacritics and/or Yup'ik endings that are not present in Cup'ig. Those with Yup'ik endings are probably based on Ivanoff's translations/interpretations. [Editor's note.—KP]
9. Although not stated in the commentaries, the two "B" masks for getting sea animals were supposedly tested in a similar way.
10. Igjugaarjuk had a close relationship with the Canadian authorities, was acquainted with Western culture, and went for trading to the Hudson Bay Company's post at Chesterfield Inlet, where a Roman Catholic mission was established in 1912. The Catholic idea of ecstatic states as possession by the Devil is recognized in Igjugaarjuk's emphasis on the purity of his own shamanism and deprecation of the dusky séances and ridiculous tricks performed by the neighboring coastal Inuit. He got his first helping spirit from *Pinnga*, a mistress of caribou, but iden-

tified her with both *Hila* (*Sila*) and *Nuliayuk* (the Gadabout, Sea Woman). Rasmussen explicitly finds *Nuliayuk* out of place (among inland people, in his siding with Birket-Smith's theory), and he prefers *Sila* to *Pinnga* as Igjugaarjuk's source of shamanic power (Sonne 1986:207; 2017:98).

11. Sources differ as to whether *toornaarsuk* and/or *apeqqiteq* were encountered in the entrance tunnel. The mediating function was apparently to keep a *toornaarsuk* at bay.
12. The first missionaries to Greenland settled on the west coast. By their identification of the Devil with *toornaarsuk*, they have complicated the evaluation of the West Greenlandic statements (see Sonne 1986).
13. *Kruttåta*, "powder snail," in Norwegian.
14. Émile Durkheim's ([1915] 1964:47) definition of the sacred goes like this: "A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden."
15. A longer version received by Rasmussen (Ostermann and Holtved 1952:261–262) also has Raven instructing people in mourning rites.
16. This is according to Inuit versions (Kleivan 1971). Raven was black from the very beginning in a Nunivak version (Fienup-Riordan 1994:124–125).
17. In the terminology of the history of religions, a Creator creates something new out of nothing; a culture hero transforms existing ways and things.
18. My identification of the female *Cellam Cua* in Agayut as an analog of Mary, mother of Christ, whose baby cries as a warning of storms (Himmelheber 2000:145), was inaccurate. The Nunivak story is too strongly echoed in East Greenlandic heritage, where Lutheran and Moravian missionaries would never have introduced or tolerated any such Catholic influence.

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