

WHALING AND WHALE SPIRITS IN THE WESTERN ARCTIC: NOTES FROM THE FIFTH THULE EXPEDITION

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ABSTRACT

Knud Rasmussen's traverse of the northern Alaska coast during the final months of the Fifth Thule Expedition (FTE) in 1924 produced an invaluable ethnographic record of Iñupiaq bowhead whaling. The Iñupiat continue a whaling tradition that originated at least 2000 years ago in the Bering Strait region and enabled the thirteenth-century Thule migration from Alaska to Greenland. Thus, in Alaska Rasmussen could study whaling as both a contemporary way of life and a key to ancestral Thule culture. Rasmussen's focus on Inuit intellectual heritage led him to pay special attention to beliefs, ceremonies, and mythology concerning the spiritual relationship between whales and human beings. Although his Alaska notes survive, Rasmussen's own conclusions from this material were never published. This article seeks to evaluate his work on whaling culture in the light of post-FTE research and to suggest comparisons with the expedition's Central Arctic data.

INTRODUCTION

By the time Knud Rasmussen reached northern Alaska on the last leg of the Fifth Thule Expedition (FTE) in the spring of 1924, he was keenly focused on what could be learned about Western Arctic Inuit whaling and its cultural foundations. The topic was of prime interest because archaeological evidence uncovered during FTE research in Canada (Mathiassen 1927) suggested that the ability to hunt bowhead whales had enabled the migration of Thule people from Alaska to Greenland in the early second millennium CE, giving rise to the cultural and linguistic unity of descendant Inuit populations across the North American Arctic. Rasmussen, who was versed in Hinrich Rink's theory that the Inuit originated in the Western Arctic interior and moved to the coast before undertaking their great migration (Marquardt 2016; Rink 1873, 1886; Michelsen, *this issue*), wrote in his Alaskan field notes that this "revolution" in their way of life arose from discovery of the "great meat animals that swam in the ocean" and the invention of maritime hunting technologies, including the "skin boat that was necessary to go whaling" (Ostermann

and Holtved 1952:20). Moreover, whaling had continued since Thule times in Iñupiaq and Yupik communities of the Bering Strait region, providing an opportunity to study it as a living cultural practice in its ancient cradle of origin (Bogoras 1904–1909; Murdoch 1892; Ray 1885; Simpson 1875; Steensby 1916).

For Rasmussen, whose scholarly interests centered on Inuit intellectual culture, the Western Arctic was above all where he could seek the origins of religious concepts and mythological themes that had presumably been carried east with the Thule migration, including the cyclical return of animals controlled by Sea Woman (Inuktitut, *Sedna* or *Nuliajuq*) and the Moon (Inuktitut, *Taqqiq*) and the role of shamans as intermediaries with these deities (Boas 1888; Kleivan 1984; Rasmussen 1929). Stories of whales and whale spirits are woven throughout Inuit mythology, but as Rasmussen would discover, nowhere more than in the Western Arctic. There he sought to investigate the arts, rituals, beliefs, and ceremonies associated with whaling, for, in Mathiassen's words (1930:68),

the people “at the rich hunting grounds of Alaska have had more time and thought for matters relating to the higher powers than in poorer regions further east.”

RASMUSSEN’S RESEARCH ON WHALING IN THE WESTERN ARCTIC

Rasmussen first entered the Western Arctic in mid-March 1924 at Cape Bathurst on the Beaufort Sea, and during the next five months of travel by dogsled and small boat he and the Inughuit expedition guides Qaavigarsuaq and Arnarulunnguaq visited Inuvialuit settlements near the Mackenzie River; Inupiaq villages on the northern Alaska coast, including Utqiaġvik (Barrow), Ulġuniq (Wainright), Qayaiqsiuġvik (Icy Cape), Kali (Point Lay), Tikigaq (Point Hope), and Qikiqtaġruk (Kotzebue); and finally the gold rush town of Nome, where they arrived by mail boat from Kotzebue on August 31 (Mathiassen 1945; Ostermann 1942; Ostermann and Holtved 1952; Rasmussen 1927) (Fig. 1).

The timing was fortunate since the first three months of this itinerary coincided with the spring whaling season, when bowhead whales (*Balaena mysticetus*) migrate north along the Alaska coast. Rasmussen observed the whale hunt at Utqiaġvik, attended the post-whaling *Nalukataq*

feast at Qayaiqsiuġvik, and gathered data on the numbers of whales taken that year in villages as far south as Tikigaq. At Tikigaq he spoke with elders to document the community’s sacred whaling ceremonies, which had been discontinued about a decade earlier, when the last *qargit* (ceremonial houses) were closed (Ostermann and Holtved 1952:60–62; Rasmussen 1927:330–333).¹ Leo Hansen, the Danish photographer and filmmaker who accompanied Rasmussen from the Central Arctic to northern Alaska, stayed behind in Utqiaġvik to film the community’s *Nalukataq* celebrations (Hansen 1927; MacKenzie and Stenport, *this issue*), later taking ship’s passage to rejoin the rest of the FTE team in Nome. Although Rasmussen’s attempt to investigate Siberian Yupik communities at Cape Dezhnev in Chukotka was unsuccessful (Schwalbe et al., *this issue*), the schooner voyage there from Nome and back in September 1924 afforded a stop at the Inupiaq village of Inġaliq on Little Diomed Island, where he was told about traditional whaling ceremonies (Ostermann and Holtved 1952:102).

Aided by his fluency in Kalaallisut, the Inuit language of Greenland, and by three years of experience with Inuktitut dialects in Canada, Rasmussen was able to converse directly with Inuvialuit and Inupiat oral scholars and to inscribe their tellings of *uqaluqtut* (historical

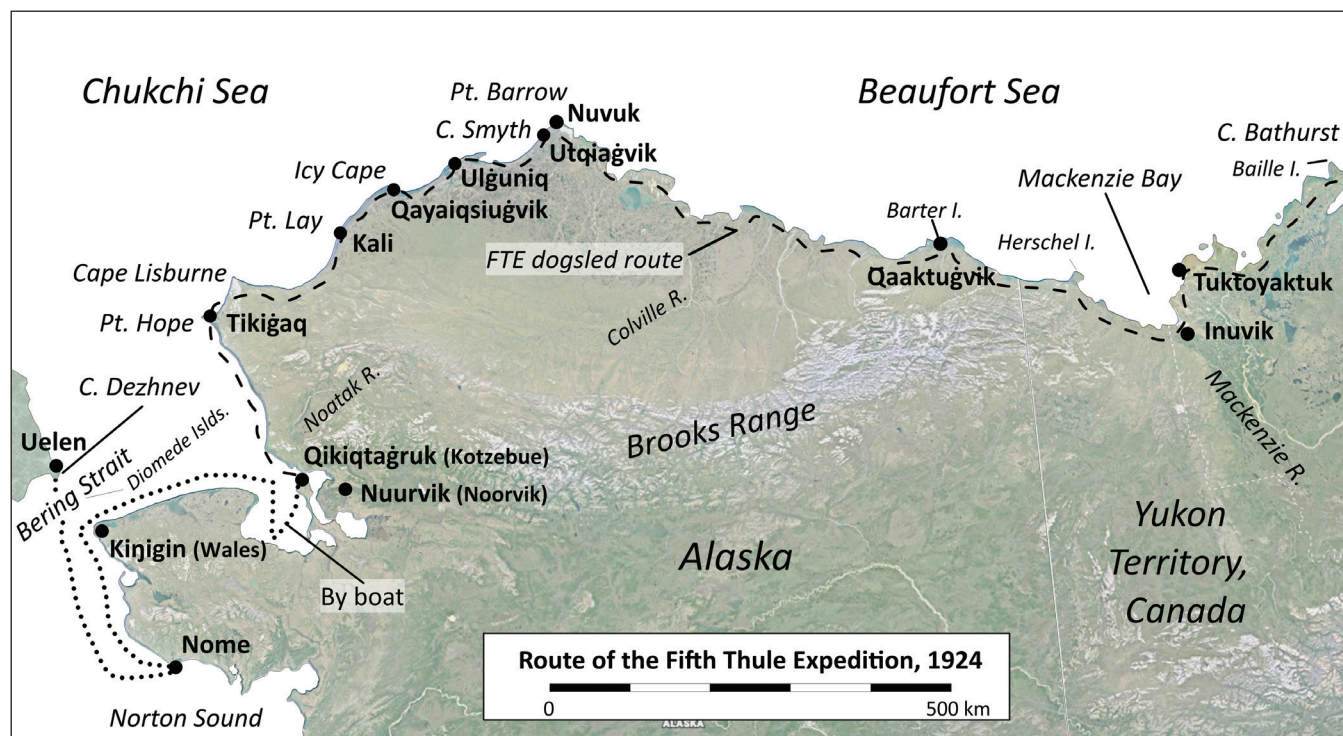


Figure 1: Knud Rasmussen’s Fifth Thule Expedition route from Cape Bathurst to Nome, 1924. Map by A. Crowell based on Mathiassen (1945:99).

narratives) and *unipquat* (legends or myths), many with whaling themes (Burch 1988; Topkok and Green 2016). To supplement this documentation of Indigenous knowledge and oral traditions, Rasmussen purchased archaeological and ethnographic objects from local residents and traders (Brower 1943), collections that now reside at the National Museum of Denmark (Mathiassen 1930).

Rasmussen's posthumously edited Yukon and Alaska field notes (Ostermann 1942; Ostermann and Holtved 1952); his popular account of the FTE, published in English as *Across Arctic America: Narrative of the Fifth Thule Expedition* (Rasmussen 1927); and *The Eagle's Gift: Alaska Eskimo Tales*, a collection of translated oral narratives (Rasmussen 1932a), do not constitute anything close to a full ethnographic account of Western Arctic whaling, yet they are early and underappreciated contributions to research on this topic. There had previously been only brief descriptions of bowhead whaling by Beechey (1831), Simpson (1875), Murdoch (1892), Ray (1885), and Stefansson (1919)—Murdoch's work at Point Barrow during the First International Polar Year of 1882–1883 being the most extensive but including little on intellectual culture. Following Rasmussen, other researchers including Edward Curtis ([1930] 1970), Froelich Rainey (1947), Robert Spencer (1959), James VanStone (1962), Rosita Worl (1980), Ernest S. Burch Jr. (1981), Tom Lowenstein (1993), Nobuhiro Kishigami (2013), and Chie Sakakibara (2020) have built on his pioneering work.

THE IMPACT OF COMMERCIAL WHALING

The FTE came at a time when Western Arctic societies were struggling to recover from intensive Euroamerican exploitation during the era of U.S. commercial whaling in the Bering, Chukchi, and Beaufort Seas (1848–1914). Although Yankee whaling for bowheads ("right whales") ended a decade before Rasmussen's arrival, its hugely disruptive effects lingered. The worst injury was the industry's wholesale slaughter of marine mammals, including an estimated 16,000 bowheads (reducing the stock to 10 to 20% of its original size) and more than 200,000 Pacific walruses (Bockstoce 1986; Bockstoce and Botkin 1982; Krupnik 2020).

The decimation of these key subsistence species, combined with epidemics of measles, influenza, and other diseases transmitted by contact with outsiders, contributed to widespread famine and death in Indigenous coastal communities of Chukotka, St. Lawrence Island, and

northern Alaska (Burch 1998; Crowell and Oozevaseuk 2006; Fortuine 1989; Krupnik and Chlenov 2013). One of Rasmussen's most poignant observations was the dramatic loss of Iñupiaq residents at Tikigāq, where he found 122 abandoned nineteenth-century houses and inferred a former population of 2000 (Ostermann and Holtved 1952:47; however, Burch [1981, 1988] estimated 650 to 700). Tikigāq, once one of the largest Inuit settlements in the Arctic because of its exceptional access to whales, had by 1920 been reduced to just 140 people (U.S. Census Bureau 1921). In addition, commercial whaling's industrial mode of production entangled Iñupiat and Inuvialuit in a wage labor system, undercutting traditional leadership by the *umialiit*, or whaling captains (Cassell 2000, 2003; Phillips-Chan 2020) and creating widespread dependency on imported goods, including bomb-loaded harpoons and shoulder guns that replaced traditional whaling weapons.

Rasmussen described these and other aspects of change in his paper on the "Adjustment of Eskimos to European Civilization" (1933). In his view, Iñupiaq societies had suffered as the result of Euroamerican contact but could still rely on whaling as a foundation for "cultural fluorescence," even with the reduced bowhead stock (Osterman and Holtved 1952:21). Somewhat paradoxically, he approved of English-language-only government education and acculturation efforts by the Bureau of Indian Affairs yet was pleased that traditional customs and beliefs had survived to the extent that there was still "a store of folklore and mythology ready to hand" (Rasmussen 1927:305).

WHALING AND THE THULE MIGRATION

The precontact history of Arctic whaling has been investigated during a century of archaeological research since the FTE, providing a retrospective frame for the expedition's focus on Inuit origins and adaptations. Artifacts and archaeofaunal data indicating systematic hunting of large cetaceans (bowhead and gray whales) and walruses—both requiring skin boats with multiperson crews, heavy harpoons, and sealskin drag floats—derive from Northern Maritime (Neo-Inuit or Neoeskimo) sites of the last two millennia. These sites belonged to the Okvik/Old Bering Sea (~100–800 CE), Birnirk (~650–1250 CE), and Punuk (~800–1200 CE) peoples who inhabited the Alaskan and Russian coasts of the Chukchi and Bering Seas and to the Western Thule culture that developed in northern Alaska

in about 1000 CE from Punuk and Birnirk roots (Collins 1937; Ford 1959; Gerlach and Mason 1992; Harritt 2015; Larsen and Rainey 1948; Mason 1998, 2020; Mason and Rasic 2019; Morrison 1983; Stanford 1976).

The Western Thule harvested bowhead and beluga whales, walruses, bearded and ringed seals, caribou, and birds using skin-covered boats (the *umiaq* and *qayaq*) for maritime hunting and dogsleds for overland travel. Thule implements included harpoons, drag floats, nets for seals and fish, throwing boards, spears, sinew-backed bows, bolas, bird darts, and fishing equipment; household items such as bow drills, pottery, ground slate knives, baleen vessels, and oil lamps; slat armor and other equipment for warfare; and personal items such as combs and snow goggles (Ford 1959; Giddings and Anderson 1984; Jensen 2016; Mason 2012; Stanford 1976). They built semisubterranean winter houses with cold-trap entrance tunnels, and their largest settlements were at Cape Prince of Wales, Point Hope, Point Barrow, and other locations where bowhead whales pass nearby during the spring and fall migrations.

In the mid-thirteenth century, Thule groups migrated east across the Canadian Arctic through Amundsen Gulf to Baffin Island and Northwest Greenland, traversing over 3500 km in just a few generations as indicated by artifact assemblages and calibrated radiocarbon dates along the route. Over the next one to two centuries, a second Thule wave passed through Coronation Gulf to the Melville Peninsula and Hudson Bay, completing settlement of the historic Inuit region (Friesen 2016; Friesen and Arnold 2008; Mason 2020; Morrison 1989). The Thule were preceded by the Pre-Dorset people who migrated from Alaska to Greenland in about 2400 BCE (Dyke and Saville 2009; Friesen 2016), but they were technologically more advanced than this earliest wave of Arctic settlers, especially in the hunting of large marine mammals.

While it has been proposed that the melting of Arctic sea ice during the Medieval Warm Period (ca. 700–1000 CE in the Western Arctic) drew both North Pacific bowheads and Thule migrants to the east (McGhee 1970), revised radiocarbon dating and new climate data indicate that the migration took place at the beginning of the Little Ice Age (1250–1900 CE) when sea ice was increasing (Mason 2020). As in the Western Arctic, eastern Thule settlements were situated where whales and walruses could be hunted in open water during the warm months and ringed seals could be harpooned at their sea ice breathing holes during winter.

Therkel Mathiassen's FTE excavations at Naujan and other sites around Foxe Basin, Hudson Bay, and northern Baffin Island, and Rasmussen's excavations at Malerualik on King William Island, provided the first archaeological evidence in Canada of the Thule culture, named for the Thule trading post in Northwest Greenland where similar artifacts were found in "Comer's Midden" (Mathiassen 1927). At Naujan, a thirteenth-century village site at Repulse Bay (Houmard and Grønnow 2017), Mathiassen investigated winter houses with walls made of rocks and whale skulls and roofs supported by whale ribs. He concluded that:

Whaling has apparently been one of the principal occupations; this is proved by the construction of the houses, in which whale bones play such a great part, and by the material used for the implements, whalebone and baleen apparently being the most important; in particular, however, the composition of the refuse heap, the large masses of baleen and whalebones which appear especially in the lower strata. (Mathiassen 1927:85)

He surmised that Thule culture must have originated around Bering Strait where bowheads are abundant and where continuity between Thule and Inupiaq cultures was evident.

Mathiassen also compared the eastern Thule to their regional descendants, noting that while the Inuit of West Greenland, Baffin Island, and Labrador, and to some extent the Iglulingmiut of Foxe Basin and the Melville Peninsula, had continued the pursuit of bowheads up to the recent past, other central Canadian groups—including the Nattilingmiut (Netsilik Inuit) and Innuinait (Copper Inuit)—had abandoned whaling before European contact and adopted a subsistence pattern based on caribou, muskoxen, fish, and ringed seals (Birket-Smith 1924; Boas 1888; Kleivan 1984; Mathiassen 1927, 1928). None of the Canadian Inuit built Thule-style winter houses or lived in permanent villages like Naujan; instead, they were seasonally nomadic, sheltering in skin tents and snow houses. Mathiassen attributed these shifts to a late coastal migration by interior-adapted groups, although it now appears that heavier ice cover during the coldest period of the late Little Ice Age curtailed open water hunting and forced changes in subsistence practices (Maxwell 1985:304–307). Mathiassen's discoveries suggested that whaling was the prime mover for Thule eastward expansion across the Arctic and that the Rink-Steensby theory of Neo-Inuit (Neoeskimo) origins around Bering Strait was correct (Rink 1873, 1886; Steensby 1916). Moreover,

he showed that cultural and economic change after the migration had been greater in the Central Arctic than in more eastern and western regions.

WHALING METHODS OLD AND NEW

Rasmussen found that the Inuvialuit at the Mackenzie River no longer hunted bowheads and had adopted a fur trade economy as the result of interaction with the Hudson's Bay Company (Ostermann 1942; Stefansson 1919), so it was not until the FTE reached Utqiagvik on May 23, 1924, that he was able to observe whaling in action. Utqiagvik was an Iñupiaq village of 250 people with stores, warehouses, an American government school, and a Protestant church, but despite colonial change it retained a vigorous whaling tradition (Ostermann and Holtved 1952:10–23).

It was the peak of the spring bowhead migration and Iñupiaq crews were camped with their boats at the ice edge several kilometers offshore, waiting for whales to pass (Fig. 2). *Umiat* were still preferred to the heavy wooden whale-boats left behind by the American whaling fleet, which were difficult to maneuver over rough shore ice to reach the water's edge. The hunters were armed with bomb guns and explosive harpoons ("dart guns") attached to lines and sealskin floats, and they sometimes struck whales from the

ice edge before launching their boats to continue the attack (cf. Murdoch 1892:276). When a whale was caught, women helped to butcher it, then hauled the meat back to town on sleds.

These methods did not differ greatly from former times, when hunters used stone-tipped whaling harpoons and lances, although informants told Rasmussen that the older weapons required a close approach by boat from behind the whale to avoid detection, and that harpooned whales dove deeply and often came up some distance away, requiring the boat crews to spread out over a large area to spot them. In former times, once the whale had been harpooned and lay on the surface exhausted from the chase, the hunters stabbed it with long lances, aiming to hit a major artery and to sever the tail muscles so it could not dive again (Rasmussen 1927:311–312).

Rasmussen collected examples of traditional whaling equipment at Utqiagvik and later at Tikiġaq, including harpoon heads carved from whale bone (Mathiassen 1930:34, 55, Pl. 13-1), slate endblades inserted in these heads, and bird-, walrus-, and whale-shaped wooden boxes for holding extra blades (Mathiassen 1930:34, 55, 65, Pl. 8-3, Pl. 13-8, Fig. 19). Despite their replacement by dart guns, the old harpoons were remembered as highly effective; Rasmussen reported that "with these primitive weapons of the Stone Age type, the hunters could, in a



Figure 2: Whaling crews and boats at the ice edge, Utqiagvik, 1924. Photo Leo Hansen. ID 24934. Courtesy of the Danish Arctic Institute.

single spring season, account for up to 22 whales at Point Barrow alone” (Rasmussen 1927:312).

This datum from oral tradition may be compared to the catches Rasmussen reported in 1924 and to statistics from other years. Five whales had been killed at Utqiaġvik by the time he departed on June 3, close to the end of the season (Fig. 3). Farther down the coast, no whales had been taken at Wainwright, one at Icy Cape, and 15 at Point Hope. The low numbers at most locations reflected a decimated bowhead population that was just beginning to recover, as Little Diomedé whalers told Curtis in 1927 (Curtis 1970:113). However, whaling success was variable from year to year due to changing weather and ice conditions (Anungazuk 2003; Bockstoce 1986; Simpson 1875:262–265). Murdoch reported the combined subsistence harvest at Utqiaġvik and Nuvuk using American whaling weapons to have been only one bowhead in 1882 and one in 1883, but 28 in 1885 (Murdoch 1892:276). For a modern comparison, Utqiaġvik whalers took 214 bowheads from 1973 to 1992 (spring and fall whaling

combined), for an average of 10.2 and a range of 3 to 22 animals per year (Braham 1995).

An important difference between precontact and post-contact Alaska Native whaling, attributable to the shift in hunting technology, was the size of the animals killed. Measurements of whale bones from archaeological sites show that Thule and Punuk hunters took predominantly juvenile animals 7 to 9 m long (Savelle and McCartney 2003), whereas contemporary Iñupiat whalers using explosive weapons take whales of all sizes, including adults up to 17 m (Braham 1995; George and Thewissen 2020). Similar selection for juvenile whales has been demonstrated at precontact archaeological sites across Arctic Canada and in Chukotka (Krupnik 1993; McCartney 1995).

THE *UMIALIK* COUPLE AND WHALING CREW

Rasmussen noted the preeminent position of the *umialik* (whale boat captain) in Iñupiaq society, writing that the “great boat-owners, the more daring whalers, had



Figure 3: Cutting up a floating bowhead whale. Utqiaġvik, 1924. Photo Leo Hansen. ID 51030. Courtesy of the Danish Arctic Institute.

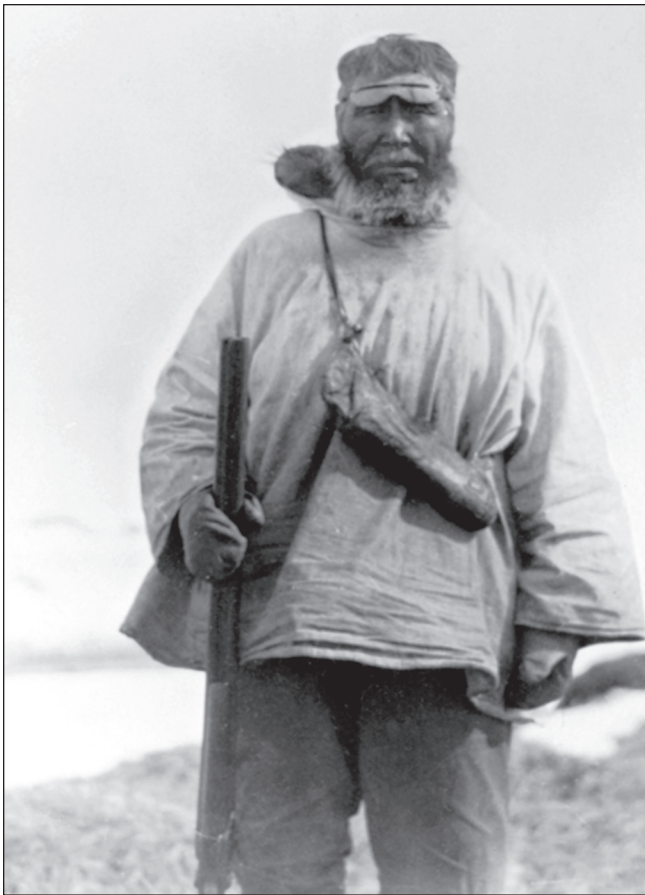


Figure 4: “Great hunter” (umialik) with whaling gun, wearing wooden snow goggles. Utqiaġvik, 1924. Photo Leo Hansen. ID 25056. Courtesy of the Danish Arctic Institute.

unrestricted authority over their crews, and held the position of chieftain in their own communities” (Rasmussen 1927:312) (Fig. 4). During the hunt, the *umialik* commanded and steered the boat from his position in the stern, anticipating the whale’s movements to bring the harpooner into striking position. In the old custom, Rasmussen was told, implements used in whaling were burned after the season except for the harpoon heads, which were saved throughout an *umialik*’s career and placed on his grave (Ostermann and Holtved 1952:21).

Rasmussen’s brief sojourn in Alaska did not permit a full understanding of the socioeconomic and ceremonial roles played by the *umialik* and his wife. In Rasmussen’s time and our own, an *umialik* owns the whaling boat and equipment for hunting, and he and his wife (also known as an *umialik*; Lowenstein 1993) are the co-leaders of a cooperative social unit (crew) of up to 30 people consisting of related hunters (often sons, nephews, and grandsons) and their spouses (Fig. 5). Some members participate in the hunt and others help to prepare food, gear, and equipment; supply hunting camps on the ice; cut up the whale; and distribute meat and blubber. Hunters could (and still can) belong to more than one crew, enhancing community food security and social cohesion (Bodenhorn 1990; Brewster 2004; Curtis 1970; Kishigami 2013; Murdoch 1892; Pulu et al. 1980; Sakakibara 2020; Sheehan 1985; Spencer 1959; VanStone 1962; Worl 1980).



Figure 5: Men of an Iñupiaq whaling crew at their camp on the sea ice. Utqiaġvik, 1924. Photo Leo Hansen. ID 24933. Courtesy of the Danish Arctic Institute.

While there is little doubt that *umialiit* have long played key roles in the social and economic life of Bering Strait communities, Rasmussen's view of them as all-powerful "chieftains" represents one end of a wide spectrum of interpretation. It accords with some analyses that portray *umialiit* as highly dominant both within their communities and in extrasocietal affairs, including trade and war (e.g., Bogoras 1904–1909, 1913; Sheehan 1985, 1997; Spencer 1959), while other studies suggest that their leadership was more limited and situational within the complicated social networks of large coastal villages (Burch 1980, 2005, 2006:312–314; Krupnik and Chlenov 2013:162–171). Their rise to prominence is also variously placed in time, from the beginning of the Thule period (Savelle and Wenzel 2003; Sheehan 1997; Whitridge 2016) to the postcontact era, when competing clan and lineage structures were weakened (Krupnik and Chlenov 2013).

Nineteenth-century *umialiit* owned or were associated with *qargit* (ceremonial houses) where preparations were made for the whale hunt, including consultations with shamans, the manufacture of equipment and clothing, and the fitting of a new bearded sealskin cover on the *umiaq* (Burch 1980; Murdoch 1892:272; Spencer 1959:334–335)

(Fig. 6). After the hunting season, whaling ceremonies and feasts were held in the *qargit* (see below). An important social change, brought about by the decline of *umialik* power and missionary pressure against shamans and whaling ceremonies, was the closing of the *qargit* (Larson 1995; Phillips-Chan 2020). Nuvuk and Utqiaġvik had a combined total of five active *qargit* in 1853, each the property of a "wealthy man" (*umialik*) (Simpson 1875:237), but by the early 1880s these were seldom used (Murdoch 1892:79–80; Ray 1885:41–42). Tikigaq formerly had six or seven *qargit* where fall and winter ceremonies were held, each used by one or more *umialiit*, but the last two were closed by 1910 (Rainey 1947:240–253).

WHALING RITUALS, REGALIA, AND CHARMS

Kenneth Toovak (1923–2009), who was born at Utqiaġvik the year before Rasmussen's visit, summarized the spiritual concepts that underlie Inupiaq whaling:

The spirit of the whale and the spirit of man are both intertwined. It is expected that whales give themselves to the whalers. They are not only giving themselves to the whalers, but to the captain's



Figure 6: Women of a whaling crew sewing a new skin cover for an *umiaq*. Utqiaġvik, 1924. Photo Leo Hansen. ID 51082. Courtesy of the Danish Arctic Institute.

wife, who has a ritual. . . . Because the spirit of the whale is believed to be that of a girl. (Quoted in Crowell 2009:166)

In this view whales are aware of human behavior and respond to rituals of respect by giving themselves to the *umialik* and his wife (Bodenhorn 1990; Brewster 2004; Rasmussen 1927:313; Spencer 1959:255–256). Rasmussen recorded some of these practices: the *umialiit* cleaned out their meat cellars to welcome the new whales' bodies, the hunters outfitted themselves with new or refurbished boats and equipment, and boat crews maintained an austere comportment on the ice, not making noise, eating little, and sleeping in the open (Curtis 1970:138; Murdoch 1892:272–273; Lowenstein 1993:xxi–xxvi; Ostermann and Holtved 1952:20–22; Rainey 1947:257–260; Rasmussen 1927:310–313; Ray 1885).

During the hunt the *umialik* and harpooner sang sacred songs to the whales, marked their cheeks with black pigment, and wore headbands decorated with Dall sheep's teeth and small whale figures chipped from chert or crystal quartz (Murdoch 1892:142; Simpson 1875:243). Charms, zoomorphic boxes for holding harpoon blades, and a stern seat for the *umialik* with a bowhead carved on its underside were placed in the *umiaq* to attract whales (Crowell 2009; Mathiassen 1930:67–70, Pl. 17).

The female identity of bowheads comes from a story that Rasmussen recorded near Icy Cape: Raven is swallowed by a whale and inside finds a young woman who personifies its spirit (Ostermann and Holtved 1952:24–26; Rasmussen 1932a:172–174; see below). As female beings, whales are thought to identify with the wife of the *umialik*, whose behavior mimetically influences the hunt. Customarily she rested quietly at home so that the whale would be passive and easily caught, she did not cut or sew so that the harpoon line would not break or tangle, and she would not enter a meat cellar lest a wounded whale retreat under the ice (Lowenstein 1993:40–41; Rainey 1947:257–259; Spencer 1959:337–338). A mock harpooning of the female *umialik* took place before the hunt at Tikiġaq (Rainey 1947:259), and a similar ritual was conducted at Wales (Curtis 1970:140), underlining her identification with the whale. Like her husband she wore a headband decorated with amulets (Mathiassen 1930:48) and painted her cheek with a stripe that “gave good whaling” (Rasmussen quoted in Mathiassen 1930:69).

According to Rasmussen's Utqiġvik notes, the wife of an *umialik* would remove one of her boots when a whale

was struck, a “preliminary step towards undressing” that would attract the whale (Rasmussen 1927:313). This practice may reflect the belief that whales did not die but merely undressed; they “took off the outside parka” (their flesh) when butchered, but their spirits were perpetually reincarnated (Rainey 1947:259). This belief remains strong, reflecting the concept of interspecies reciprocity between Iñupiat and bowhead whales (Brewster 2004; Edwardson 2004; Sakakibara 2020).

A signature duty of the female *umialik* was to provide the whale with a libation of fresh water, which she poured over its snout from a wooden pail decorated with ivory carvings and chains (Crowell 2009; Curtis 1970:141; Ostermann and Holtved 1952:26; Rainey 1947:245; Spencer 1959:345; Stefansson 1919:389). Iñupiat customarily offered fresh water to animals of the sea, and seal or whale blubber to animals of the land, in the belief that each craved these substances that were not available to them in life (Brower 1943:16; Rainey 1947:267; Spencer 1959:272). The female *umialik* performed a similar water ritual to refresh the *umiaq*—itself considered to be a living animal—before it was launched in the spring (Curtis 1970:137–138; Rainey 1947:257).

WHALING FEASTS AND CEREMONIES

The traditional cycle of communal whaling rites included the *Nalukataq* and *Apuġauti* feasts given by *umialiit* at the end of the spring hunting season; *Kivġiq*, the Messenger Feast, an intervillage trade and dance festival hosted by wealthy sponsors, often *umialiit*; and communal winter ceremonies to appeal to the whales (Curtis 1970; Rainey 1947; Spencer 1959).

Rasmussen's only opportunity to observe a whaling ceremony was at Qayaiġsiuġvik (Icy Cape), where he attended *Nalukataq*. This feast, still practiced in Iñupiaq whaling communities, is hosted by a successful *umialik* couple to celebrate the catch (Brower 1943:61–63; Crowell 2009; Curtis 1970:135–160; Larson 2003; Murdoch 1892:272–275; Simpson 1875:243; Spencer 1959:350–353). Whale meat and *maktak* (whale skin and blubber) are served in an outdoor festival space backed by whaleboats tipped on their sides and strung with flags of the whaling crews (Fig. 7). The feast is followed by dancing, singing, and *nalukataq* (“to be tossed up and down”) in which celebrants are launched into the air from a walrus or bearded seal skin trampoline, often made from an



Figure 7: *Nalukataq* dancing. Utqiagvik, 1924. Photo Leo Hansen. ID 24825. Courtesy of the Danish Arctic Institute.

old boat cover (see MacKenzie and Stenport, *this issue*). Masked performances by whaling crews were once part of *Nalukataq* but disappeared by the 1880s (Phillips-Chan 2020; Spencer 1959:347–352).

At Qayaiqsiugvik, village residents and visitors congregated outside the *qargi* dressed in new clothing made for the occasion. The whale's tail was cut into slices and distributed, followed by singing, dancing, and drumming on round, membrane-covered tambours. Leo Hansen's 1924 footage of a *Nalukataq* celebration at Utqiagvik adds visual documentation to Rasmussen's brief ethnographic notes (Hansen 1927; MacKenzie and Stenport, *this issue*).

Kivgiq, the Messenger Feast, is linked to the story of the Eagle Mother, who instructed human beings how to build the first *qargi*, perform songs and dances in her honor, and use a wooden box drum to sound out the beating of her heart (Ostermann and Holtved 1952:38–42) (Fig. 8). Once widespread across northern and western Alaska, *Kivgiq* is still held in modernized form at Utqiagvik, where it signifies the vibrancy of Indigenous modernity and sovereignty (Ikuta 2007). In former times it was hosted in the *qargit* by *umialiit* who invited guests from other villages for a five-day round of feasting, dances, athletic competitions, and gift exchanges in which guests were bestowed

with *qayat*, sleds, sealskins filled with oil, and other tokens of the hosts' wealth and success (Bodfish 1991:23–24; Burch 2005:172–180; Curtis 1970:146–147, 168–177; Kingston 1999; Ostermann and Holtved 1952:103–112; Spencer 1959:210–228).

Rasmussen's transcription of the Eagle Mother story came from the elder Sagdluaq of Colville River (Ostermann and Holtved 1952:38–42), who may have also been the source for his detailed notes about the northern Inupiaq *Kivgiq* festival (Ostermann and Holtved 1952:103–112). The word *kivgiq* refers to the two men sent as messengers to invite guests from another village, beginning the sequence of ritual exchanges between the two communities. *Kivgiq* was rich with language, art, and regalia symbolizing the Eagle Mother, who was identified as an *umialik* (Ostermann and Holtved 1952:104). The equating of *umialiit* and eagles is reinforced by North Pacific mythology about *tiñmiaqput* ("giant eagles") who catch whales in their talons (Bogoras 1904–1909:328; Crowell 2009; Curtis 1970:168–177; Nelson 1899:445–446, 486–487; see below).

Other winter ceremonies were occasions for supplication of the whale spirits. At Utqiagvik, whaling was followed by what Murdoch called the "great winter festival"



Figure 8: King Island man with box drum used for the Messenger Feast and Wolf Dance. Nome, 1924. Photo Leo Hansen. ID 51057. Courtesy of the Danish Arctic Institute.

in which dancers draped their heads with wolf, bear, fox, and lynx skins (Ray 1885:41–42) and performed masked dances (Murdoch 1892:366–375; Spencer 1959:293–294). Chest plaques worn by the dancers depicted the legendary giant *Kikamigo* holding a whale in each hand (Murdoch 1892:370–372). Rasmussen collected two whaling dance masks at Utqiagvik but did not learn details of their use (Mathaissen 1930:48).

At Little Diomedé, he met an elderly woman who told him that the people of the island held dances and feasts for the “soul of the whale.” The men sat silently in a darkened *qargit* to compose songs for the ceremonies, which “take shape in the minds of men and rise up like bubbles from the depths of the sea” (Ostermann and Holtved 1952:102). The singing and ceremonies associated with whaling were described in more detail by Curtis (1970:113–116).

Rasmussen’s richest material on whaling ceremonialism came from Tikigaq, where the elder Qalajaaq described the Sitting Ceremony, formerly hosted by the community’s *umialiit* each autumn in the *qargit* (Ostermann and Holtved 1952:60–62). Rasmussen understood “*Suvdlut*” (*Suglut*) to be the name of the entire five-day sequence of ritual performances but Froelich Rainey, who conducted ethnographic research at Tikigaq in 1940, learned that it was merely one phase of the Sitting Ceremony, named for half masks of white caribou skin (*suglut*) that the celebrants wore (Rainey 1947:247–253; see Lowenstein 1993:114–125).

During the Sitting Ceremony, the *umialiit* painted the beams of the *qargit* with whaling scenes and their wives greeted a whale figure carved from ice with water from their ceremonial pails. Sacred objects were suspend-

ed from the ceiling, including a board painted like the starry night sky, a carved wooden whale, an intricately devised model of an *umiaq* filled with paddlers who could be animated with strings, and a mechanized bird. During *Suglut* these models were brought to life by puppeteers, who made the miniature crewmen “attack” the whale and caused the bird (presumably a Giant Eagle) to swoop down and peck at pieces of whale blubber. Rasmussen was inspired by these marvelous descriptions to speak of the Point Hope *qargi* as a “living spirit-house” (Ostermann and Holtved 1952:60).

During other days of the Sitting Ceremony, there was feasting, singing, masked dancing, and the spinning of a feathered top that sent up clouds of eagle down to predict the fortunes of the coming season (Lowenstein 1993; Ostermann and Holtved 1952:60–62; Rainey 1947:347–353). The *qargit* were closed after each year’s Sitting Ceremony, but at the next moon the female *umialiit* stood in the entryways of their houses, raised their ceremonial pails, and called out, “Alignuk [the Moon], drop a whale into this pot so I can kill one next season!” (Rainey 1947:253).

WHALING MYTHOLOGY

Some mythological narratives of the Inuit and Siberian Yupiit have continuous or nearly continuous Arctic distributions from Chukotka to Greenland, including “Sun and Moon” (a brother rapes his sister and chases her to the sky, where she becomes the sun and he the moon), “The Sea Woman” (a woman’s chopped-off fingers become sea mammals), and “Salmon Father” (a spirit creates animals by dropping wood chips in water) (Sheppard 1998). Because they are so widespread, these stories appear to be survivals from at least the time of the Thule migration, although probably composed much earlier. In contrast, some are known only from the Western Arctic—including “The Origin of the Messenger Feast” (see above) and “Raven Creator” (Raven creates the land and/or people)—while others are unique to the Central and Eastern Arctic. The more geographically restricted stories must have arisen independently in their respective regions *after* the migration, resulting in distinct realms of Arctic folklore lying west and east of the Mackenzie River (Bierhorst 1985; Boas 1888:641–643; Bogoras 1902; Chowning 1962; Nelson 1899:450–518; Sheppard 1998). Even stories that are common to both regions have changed since the migration, resulting in western and eastern variants.

Rasmussen’s research on the oral literature of Arctic Canada and Alaska (Ostermann and Holtved 1952; Rasmussen 1929, 1930, 1931, 1932a, 1932b; Sonne, *this issue*) brought early attention to this dichotomy, and the present discussion will focus on one of its salient aspects—the elaborate cosmology of the human-whale relationship in the Western Arctic. One of its expressions was a shift in emphasis between the two deities believed to control human access to sea mammals: Sea Woman (*Sedna*, *Nuliajuq*, *Takannakapsaaluk*, “the terrible one down there”) and the Moon (*Taqqiq*, *Alignuk*) (Boas 1888:583–587; Holtved 1967; Kleivan 1984; Rasmussen 1929:62–76, 123–129; 1931:224–232; Wardle 1900). In the Sea Woman story, a girl marries a petrel and her father steals her back; in a storm whipped up by the angry bird-husband, she is thrown overboard and clings to the side of the boat, whereupon her father brutally chops off her fingers. Her finger joints turn into seals, walruses, and whales, and she sinks to the bottom of the sea. Transformed by violence into a powerful, malevolent spirit, Sea Woman sends storms to the world above and closely guards the sea mammals in her undersea house. She releases them only when a shaman descends to comb her tangled hair, made filthy by human violations of her strict laws. In the Central and Eastern Arctic, Sea Woman was the main focus of taboos, rituals, and shamanistic interventions (Boas 1888:603–609; Rasmussen 1929:123–129), whereas the Moon, who sent seals and caribou to earth at the request of shamans, was a benevolent but lesser deity (Boas 1888:598–599; Kleivan 1984; Rasmussen 1929:73–91).

In the Western Arctic this relationship was reversed: Sea Woman was vestigial, and her story was reported at only a few locations, including the Mackenzie River (Ostermann 1942:56) and Port Clarence (Boas 1894). There is little evidence of ritual practices devoted to her, although at Tikigāq shamans sent their helping spirits (*tuungat*) to the undersea realm of a being reminiscent of Sea Woman whose name, *Ni-gevik* (“the place of food”), is phonologically and etymologically equivalent to her Greenlandic Inughuit name, *Nerrivik* (Lowenstein 1993:133–138; Rainey 1947:257–258; Sonne, pers. comm. 2019). In contrast, the Moon (Inupiaq *Alignuk*) was the all-important caretaker and provider of animals, particularly whales (Lowenstein 1993:14–15). In “How the Spider Came,” a story recorded by Rasmussen at Tikigāq, three women enter the sky house of *Alignuk*, where they see caribou galloping on the roof beams and a huge water pail where whales, walruses, and seals are

swimming (Ostermann and Holtved 1952:228; Rainey 1947:270–271). They gaze through a hole in the floor and see the people below at Tikiġaq beseeching *Alignuk* to send them whales. Requests to the Moon by shamans and hunters for the replenishment of game are described in “The Legend of Najuko Who Was Taken up to the Moon,” recorded by Rasmussen at the Mackenzie River (Ostermann 1942:75–76), and “The Shaman in the Moon,” a Kotzebue Sound narrative reported by Nelson (1899:515).

Previous reference has been made to the story of Raven swallowed by a whale; inside lives a young woman, its soul or spirit, who tends a burning oil lamp representing the whale’s heart and goes restlessly in and out as the animal breathes. Intriguingly, the story depicts the whale’s body as a Thule house with a rib-lined ceiling vault and sleeping benches around the sides (Ostermann and Holtved 1952:24–26; Rasmussen 1932a:172–174). While there is no exact equivalent to this myth in the Central Arctic, there are several parallels. In an Iglulingmiut tale a girl marries a whale who makes a house for her out of its own bones (Rasmussen 1929:281–283), also recorded for the Nattilingmiut (Rasmussen 1931:409–412). Then there is Sea Woman herself, who lives in a whale bone house said to be like that of the Tuniit (Thule ancestors) and tends an oil lamp as she keeps guard over the sea mammals (Rasmussen 1927:123–126). In these examples we may see an original Thule concept of Sedna as a female whale spirit, before her elevation into a cosmic controller of all sea mammals.

Although some aspects of the Raven myth cycle are shared by Yupiit and Inuit from Chukotka to Greenland, it is only in the Western Arctic that Raven is viewed as the creator of animals, people, and the land (Sheppard 1998). In recorded tales of the Inuvialuit at the Mackenzie River (Ostermann 1942:64–65) and Inupiat at Utqiāġviq (Spencer 1959:384–385), Colville River (Rasmussen 1932:68–69), Kobuk River (Curtis 1970:214–215), Noatak River (Rasmussen 1932a:64–69), and Point Hope (Lowenstein 1993:5–9; Ostermann and Holtved 1952:48), Raven harpoons a dark mass floating in the ocean (or a small sod that magically grows) and tows it to where he wants the land to form. At Tikiġaq, the earthen whale became Point Hope spit: “That’s why Tikiġaq’s the animal / The land is alive / It’s a whale he harpooned / when Raven Man married the *uiluaqtaq* [a woman who rejects men; in this story, a female shaman]” (Asatchaq, quoted in Lowenstein 1993:9).

Another key Western Arctic theme related to whaling is the Giant Eagle (*tiġmiaqpaq*, also *metervik*) that can snatch up whales, caribou, and people in its talons, mentioned above in connection with the Messenger Feast and the Sitting Ceremony (Curtis 1970:168–177; Nelson 1899:445–446, 486–487). The connection between eagles and *umialiit* is explicitly portrayed in the tale of “Qaluneq,” told by Apaakag of Noatak River (Rasmussen 1932:76–88). A seal-boy named Qaluneq kills a *tiġmiaqpaq* and puts on the bird’s skin and wings, assuming its ability to fly as well as its predatory powers, and catches whales that he takes to his wife’s family in the mountains. Stories from northwestern Alaska tell of Giant Eagles’ nests on local peaks, surrounded by whale bones (similar to Yup’ik stories from the lower Yukon River), and the first whalers were said to have lived on mountain summits before moving down to the coastal lowlands that Raven created (Crowell 2009; Nelson 1899:486; Ostermann and Holtved 1952:225; Pratt 1993; Rasmussen 1932a:68–69).

Mythology, ceremony, and ritual in the whaling regions of the Western Arctic reflect a worldview in which human and whale beings are sacredly interconnected. The whale’s spirit is human and feminine; its body is metaphorically a house, a *qargi* (Sheehan 1997), or an *umiag*; it gives itself to and is celebrated in the human community, which is nourished by its flesh and burns its oil for light and warmth; its eternal soul travels between the sea, earth, and sky, guided by the Moon and emissary shamans; and its body, harpooned by Raven, is the ground on which people live out their own cycle of being. Perhaps because belief must be relevant or fade away, this worldview remained strong in the Western Arctic, where whales are abundant and where whaling has continued from the Thule period to the present day. It diminished in the Central Arctic, where deteriorating climatic conditions led to the decline of whaling and a harsher world in which a penurious and demanding Sea Woman held back the animals of the sea.

CONCLUSION

Mathiassen dug for the artifacts of Thule culture, but Rasmussen sought its life and soul. Nearly three years of the FTE in the Central Arctic produced a monumental body of ethnographic data on Inuit groups north and west of Hudson Bay, yet the Western Arctic remained an imperative final destination because its Indigenous whaling communities carried on a way of life that closely mirrored that of their Thule ancestors. Despite the ecological

and social impacts of industrial whaling, the devastation wrought by famine and epidemics, and the colonizing agendas of foreign traders, missionaries, and schoolteachers, Western Arctic whaling societies had adapted and endured, proving the strength of their ancestral foundations.

Rasmussen's timely and fortuitous reporting in 1924 allowed the comparison of modern and traditional whaling culture. Despite the adoption of whaling firearms, the methods and results had not radically changed, even since precontact times, and essential implements of the Thule whaling complex were still used, including the *umiaq* and seal skin floats. Whaling remained the defining subsistence pursuit and way of life in villages with access to the bowhead migration, and its socioeconomic organization around boat crews led by *umaliit* remained intact, or was perhaps reinvigorated after commercial whaling captains and shore bosses relinquished control.

Many of the spiritual beliefs and practices associated with whaling also persisted, although the main winter ceremonies, feasts, and shamanic rituals were curtailed or discontinued under colonial rule. As a result, much of what Rasmussen recorded about these matters was memory culture, yet he arrived in time to speak with knowledgeable elders in their language and with a level of intuition and understanding that no other Arctic ethnographer of his day possessed. As a result, he recorded the first substantial body of Western Arctic Inuit mythology north of Bering Strait, demonstrating its unique emphasis on the relationship between whale spirits and human beings and on the Moon as the controller of game. This oral literature offers a tantalizing glimpse of the worldview that the Thule carried east on their sweeping Arctic expansion and that informed the Inuit cultures that came after them.

NOTES

1. Spellings of Inupiatun words are based on MacLean (2014). Plural nouns (meaning more than two) are formed with a final "t"; e.g., *umiaq/umiat*, *qayaq/qayat*, *qargil/qargit*, *umialik/umialiit*.

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