

A narrative on narratives in contemporary Greenland

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I have been asked to say a few words about the status of orality in contemporary Greenland. It is a big task considering that it is not my primary field of research at this moment – though I do involve the orality aspect generally in my work as well as I give classes in the subject. I am sure, or rather, I know that quite many of you, who are present at this conference have much more qualified academic viewpoints to offer – drawing diachronic theoretical and empirical lines back from the research on ballads and folklore to the discussions of the Homeric Question to Milman Parry's studies on the Serbo Croatian singers (PARRY 1987) and Albert B. Lord's influential monograph *The Singer of Tales* (1960), which all led to the formulation of the Oral-Formulaic Theory (FOLEY 1988) – and maybe further to the theoretical viewpoints of Walter J. Ong (1982) concerning primary and secondary orality – probably ending up with the new kind of orality which is created along with the introduction of electronic media forms and modern indigenous literature – and how this has influenced orality of the people of the Arctic – for example at a structural (environmental) and at a relational (social) level. So – I will ask you to make allowances for my shortcomings on these matters.

In this context I have chosen to present a few aspects of various possibilities – focusing on the traces of the Greenlandic traditional narration, which I think I am able to identify in contemporary interpersonal narratives. For that purpose I will draw on different examples from Narsarsuaq in South Greenland, a former American Military Base; I will draw some examples from recent clashes between religion and traditional belief; I will mention examples of stereotypes among Danes and Greenlanders as to superstition including contemporary death rituals and finally I will draw some examples of oral features in written Greenlandic horror literature.

The definition of 'orality' in this context is simply the flow of informal 'word of mouth' narratives among people.

So, please consider this presentation as an example of demonstrating a narrative among others on some subjectively selected on-going narratives at the interpersonal level in contemporary Greenland.

Case: Narsarsuaq- a place of mystery

Allow me to lead you back to the 1980s. I was teaching at elementary school in a small village in South Greenland, called Narsarsuaq with only 120 inhabitants. The village was established in 1941 by the Americans under the code name *Bluie West One*. During the Second World War it was the most important military base in Greenland, as Narsarsuaq was placed in the centre between the American Continent and the American Base in Iceland. During the Korean War between 1951-1954, Narsarsuaq became once again an important military base for the Americans. It ceased to function as a base in 1958 (ANCKER 1995; GULDAGER 1999).

In all this period Narsarsuaq was probably the biggest town in Greenland with about 2000 soldiers, at times up till 5000 inhabitants, including civilians and the families of the soldiers (*ibid.*) Right after the Americans left the base in 1958 with all the empty concrete buildings, and with only 10 people left to attend the newly established life-saving services and ice patrol you can imagine that Narsarsuaq must have looked like – a ghost town.

During all my childhood in the Southern part of Greenland this place was always surrounded by mystique and secretiveness – and it is still. One of the most known legends among the locals about the American period is that Narsarsuaq was used by the Americans to hide away, and treat, their most severely injured soldiers, of which some of them allegedly had been exposed to chemical weapons. It is told that these soldiers were treated under very restricted and isolated circumstances, before they were sent home in coffins – that is, those who did not survive (cf. GULDAGER 1999). Stories of people, who allegedly have seen the ghosts of these injured soldiers, were common as late as the 1980s, when I was staying there. In my childhood we slept in the remains of these soldiers iron beds and grey military blankets when camping at a place called Eqalugaarsuit, near our home town – and of course we felt the presence of the haunting souls of the deceased injured American soldiers, especially in the night – through the spots on the blankets which we truly believed were the dried-up drops of blood from the soldiers. Even though it was never confirmed from the part of the American Military Forces, or from the Danish liaison officer – or from soldiers who have revisited the place – they all deny that anything of the kind ever happened. An American soldier, Robert Pickering, has told that the rumours of the severely injured soldiers probably had their source in the fact that the Hospital Valley was highly secured by armed guards in some periods – not because of any secret activities – but simply because the female nurses were extremely disturbed by love sick male soldiers (GULDAGER 1999). Nevertheless, it is still a ‘true story’ among the local people in the Southern region of Greenland that these young soldiers were hidden away there – in

order to avoid fierce reactions from the soldiers' families and the American public. It has become part of the *oral* history of the area – no matter what the authorities, military reports or individual soldiers say.

Orality versus Christianity

Well, one of my subjects in elementary school, and then as teacher – was religious knowledge – obligatorily scheduled. I thought it would be a good idea to educate the children about the pre-colonial beliefs based on oral tradition such as Inuit cosmology – and I did! Some of the parents were terrified about my disposition and asked me to stop filling their children's minds with heathenish nonsense as they feared they would be doomed to eternal damnation. The area is mostly populated with sheep farmers – generally with strong Christian beliefs. I did not stop – instead, I started every school day with prayers and hymns, which I re-learned from the morning prayers on the radio – I had been outside Greenland for 11 years and was a bit rusty on these affairs. Beforehand I exercised these to my mother on the telephone to be sure that I got the tune right – and then I was free to teach their children anything!

The paradox was that among these people there were very skilled storytellers of supernatural phenomena, and very eager listeners, whether these phenomena were self experienced or transmitted to them by people mostly specified by names, places and periods, – often with a touch of theological virtues to it: good versus evil; faith, hope and charity.

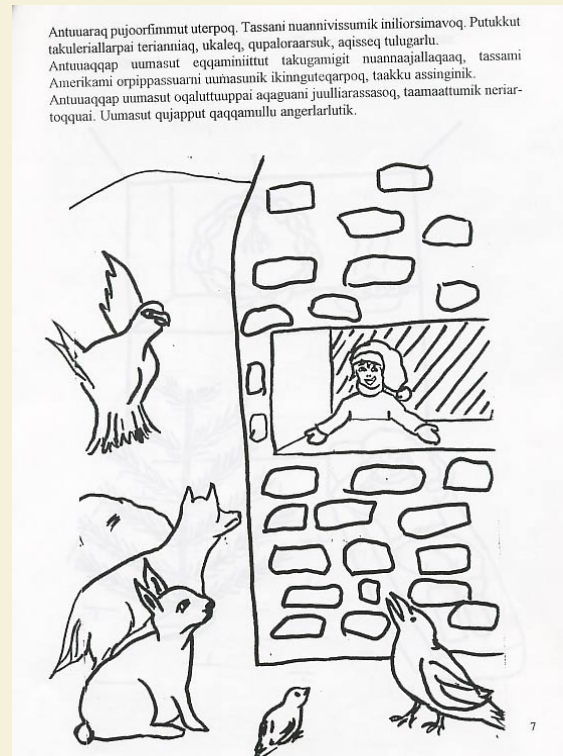
Some of the stories were about named *qivittut*. *Qivittoq* is, as you may well know – a person who has left people into the wilderness and hereafter become a half physical and half spiritual creature. A *qivittoq* has magical powers, can change into a fox or raven – and is immortal. Other stories were about a drifting torso of a long haired woman, who once lived there – haunting children's bedrooms in the middle of the night in search of her dead children. Or, stories of haunting spirits in the former military club or bar, called *The Ravens Roost Mess* – which is now used as a village hall – where whisperings in the dark, indefinable shadows or noises of music and foreign voices and flickering bulbs occur from time to time – and lead to momentary seizures of collective sense of horror, – or the incidents lead to a welcome opportunity to share a well told story, right or true – it does not matter!

The Ravens Roost Mess built in the early 1950-ies functioned as a place of entertainment for the soldiers, who from time to time were entertained by American stars. The most famous visit was that of Marlene Dietrich, who gave a concert there in 1944 (GULDAGER 1999). She lost one of her golden stilettos, which was found at the dunghill in

Narsarsuaq 50 years later, but no-one knows today where it has ended up – however, people still talk about it and – who knows, some day it will turn up again. At the very same dunghill you will still be able to find scraps of aeroplanes, American cars, coca cola bottles, Zippo lighters engraved with the deceased owners' initials from then, and other belongings of the soldiers. All these findings still nourish the need for and interest in entertaining narratives of more or less dubious content.



Photo: Birgitte Jacobsen



From: Birgit Kleist Pedersen: "Antuaraq" (1987)

From fantasy to oral truth among children in Narsarsuaq

As shown above you can see the only sign left from the Military Hospital in Narsarsuaq – the chimney. During my stay at this place I decided to invent a short Christmas story about a little pixy for the youngest children at school just before the Christmas Holidays some time in the late 1980'ies. The purpose was that they could bring it home, read it for fun and paint the drawings – and at the same time, my purpose was to create some narratives, smuggling in the history of the area back to the pre-colonial period into the fiction – to give the pupils a sense of historical background *other* than the 'American Base-narrative' – and other than 'this place is not a real domicile, only an airport'-narrative. In short, the first little story was about this pixy, Little Anthony from Canada who – while playing the forbidden game jumping from cloud to cloud (just as children know in Greenland – don't jump from one ice floe to the other), by accident

drifted away from his friends, who could not rescue him. He drifted to even cooler and distant skies and ended up in the chimney of the Hospital Valley in Narsarsuaq, when he fell down as the cloud turned into snow. Under great hardships, the little pixy eventually got some friends among the local wild animals – through magical powers created out of his inner struggles etc.

The peculiar thing for me was that several years after I had left the place and was stopping over there on my way to my hometown, some of the parents told me that ever since I left, year by year, the children and parents have made a ritual of going to the chimney every Christmas time to offer the little pixy gifts for the Holidays – and the children always hope to get a glimpse of Little Anthony. The figure has become part of a true story in the adventurous minds of the children, which indicates for me that we all need *some* degree of mystery in our everyday life – child or adult – something to share in a kind of a space for a ‘time-out’ activity from the daily ‘time-in’ routines¹. Now, I will leave the case of Narsarsuaq as a place of mystery and turn to ...

Clashes between religion and traditional belief

At the turn of this millennium Greenlanders’ occupation with supernatural phenomena suddenly became remarkably visible in the public space.

On the 3rd of January 2003 it was announced on the News that a healer, Maanguaq Berthelsen – a self appointed shaman – had been hired by the chief of government administration to heal the buildings of The Home Rule Government to get rid of the suppressive (Danish) spirits descending from the colonial period in order to conjure up ‘the Greenlandic Spirits’, news that circulated worldwide and which resulted in a political chaos, as well as grave concerns were expressed by the Greenlandic Bishop, Sofie Petersen, and other leading priests. Subsequently, Greenland’s only one month old coalition government collapsed amid political squabbling – set off, partly as a result of nepotism, partly set off by the healing seance.

The year before (in September 2002), revivalist séances organized by a so called ecumenist movement, ‘Evangelist’, from Denmark took place in the small settlement with 382 inhabitants – Kullorsuaq in North Greenland – followed by an intense debate in especially one of the national newspapers (DAHL 2002; KLEEMANN 2002a, 2002b, 2002c, 2002d; OLSEN 2002) – an event which lead you back to the spectacular so-called ‘Habakuk movement’ in the fjords of Maniitsoq in the 1780-ies, with the Greenlandic Moravian oriented couple Habakuk and Maria Magdalena as protagonists – Habakuk as a self-appointed prophet and his wife as a messenger or medium of Jesus (cf. SÖDERBERG 1974; LIDEGAARD 1986; THISTED 1997), and 100 years later – another self-appointed prophet

¹ Borrowing the expressions from Janice Radway used in her *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (RADWAY 1984).

appeared, Inequnarneq, alias The Virgin Mary from Upernavik in the 1880s, who claimed to have given birth to the Infant Jesus. The Infant Jesus allegedly told her that she, Mary, should be given '100 money' – and as she had had a relationship – of some kind – with a Danish carpenter, she claimed that she should be given 'Danish status' and therefore be allowed to live among the Danes. Then, God would give wheat and money to the Danes and seals to the Greenlanders – otherwise it would lead to the end of the world (FLEISCHER 2003).

The event in Kullorsuaq in 2002 split the small community and families apart and the disorder gave rise to headlines such as "Religious war" – and it was written in one of the newspapers that:

A sensation was created among the small population when witnessing people who threw away their indispensable walking sticks or hearing aids and their claiming of having recovered completely. The rumor of the so-called miracles in Kullorsuaq were spread quickly to other settlements and attracted further more people affected by illness (...) It caused emotional reactions and dismay with many of the opponents who interpreted the conversions as expression of renunciation of God and of the Lutheran Church. (KLEEMAN 24/9,2002a. My translation.)

During the séances the converted were offered – baptism – in one of the basins of the fish factory. The Evangelist preacher Christian Hedegaard tells:

100 of the 400 inhabitants went singing down to the fish factory to baptise 29 locals (...) but then the trouble started. The people from the fish factory denied us access, as they didn't see us as a proper church. Orders given from the top [authorities]. (KLEEMANN 1/10, 2002b. My translation.)

Hereafter the baptism was conducted in some kind of a basin with hot water outside in the cold air. The preacher leader reported the event as follows:

Evil tongues said that people in the settlement had seen the water 'boiling', and the accusations now were that the souls of the baptised left them and that they became living dead after the baptism. The same night a young girl in the settlement had a dream in which she saw that the souls of the baptised left their bodies and the inhabitants of Kullorsuaq were now convinced that the baptised had left the Christian Faith. (KLEEMANN 1/10, 2002b. My translation.)

In other words, the Devil had taken over. According to the newspaper, a message from the Greenlandic Bishop was sent to the settlement to reassure people that the baptized were still Christians – and the police in the 'mother town'², Upernavik sent a fax

² Greenland consists of 18 municipalities to which 60 settlements are attached, some towns have only two settlements to administrate, like Ittoqqortoormiit, while others like Upernavik has 9 settlements to administrate. Town plus settlements make up a municipality – the 'mother town' has the superior responsibility to the whole municipality.

in which order and discipline was urged and it was reminded that freedom of conscience is ruling in Greenland (KLEEMANN 1/10,2002b).

The question is whether all these events are symptomatic expressions of an alarming need of social 'belonging' to some kind of a network, which the established Church evidently is no longer able to offer – a need of a forum where spirituality and emotions are allowed or accepted to be acted out or expressed within a community where social control is ruling to a high degree.

Stereotypes among Danes and Greenlanders as to superstition

At the end of the 1990-ies, when a new quarter, Qernertunnguit, was under construction in Nuuk, rumours about haunting ghosts within the construction were so intense that they reached the national newspapers along with a number of different versions of what 'really' happened. One of the versions which reached me – was about a Danish workman who got a fit of horror when he allegedly had been confronted with a spirit from one of the ancient graves, which the construction was being built upon. It was told that he was hospitalized for the medical diagnosis: chock. Among Greenlanders the reaction was that '*even a Dane*' experienced being exposed to haunting of some kind – as if the fact that it was a Dane – legitimized the incident as a true one.

From the Danish part the narrative is right opposite, as told in a weblog newsletter:

(...) In Nuussuaq there is a place called town of ghosts (...). The reason for this name is that the Greenlanders are superstitious – more than most other peoples. This quarter is placed on an ancient cemetery (...). When they built these houses out here, some Danish workmen were sent for as extra help. One day, (...) they decided to make some practical jokes on some of the Greenlandic workmen. They dressed in sheets with different 'ghost equipment' and scared the life out of the poor Greenlanders. They got so scared that they had to be hospitalized in the psychiatric ward (...). (LARS BUHL, Sept 2005).

It is always interesting to see what 'the others' find interesting with *you* as 'the others' – it makes you pay attention to why this or that characteristic is praised as an exotic feature – and it gives you – the other way round – an opportunity to get an insight in 'the others' s customs or minds. That is, by describing 'you', 'they' tell more about themselves than 'they' do about 'you'.

Focusing on stereotypes among Greenlanders and Danes, I did not realize until recently, when reading Nurse Gwilli Bergenholtz's field work (master thesis) on death as a social event at the medical ward at the hospital in Nuuk, that there are differences between Danish and Greenlandic death rituals as to the treatment of the dead body. Bergenholtz mentions – with surprise – that the dead family member usually is wrapped in layers of warm clothes as "it is so cold in the earth – with permafrost". Danes, she claims are dressed in what is mentioned as "average nice clothes". Further, usually the local

nurses arrange the finger of dead Greenlanders interlaced – which is apparently not the case with the dead body of Danes – as the argument is that they are not as strong believers as Greenlanders. Bergenholtz confirms that it is not a custom in Denmark to arrange the fingers of the dead interlaced. Another difference is that Bergenholtz experienced that Danish nurses open the window in the room of the dead “to make it easier for the soul to go where it is supposed to go”, while Greenlanders believe, as she claims, that the soul is present for some time in the room before it takes the journey to the Land of Dead, and therefore give the next-of-kin a sense of being together with the deceased for a little while longer. Socializing around the dead all the way until the funeral is over – (and years after to come) – also seem to be much more evident with Greenlanders than with Danes. Further, she found that Greenlanders, when they seem to have accepted the institutionalized hospital rules in the first place, they turn to their own rules when occupying the room of the dead (at the medical ward) where they re-arrange things to make them fit to their own ritual. At some points, she argues that the rituals she has been observing bear a resemblance to traditional Inuit death ritual. Finally Bergenholz mentions the difference of name giving from the dead to a new born, which symbolically means revival of the dead – as so often mentioned in the ethnographical literature on *the* Inuit. True enough, but that is the simplest explanation – there are many layers and nuances to it, which would call for another paper.

Orality in Greenlandic literature – especially in the horror genre

The written Greenlandic literature – especially horror narratives – make rich use of the features known from the Greenlandic oral story telling tradition such as a frequent use of the affixes: *-gooq*, *-rooq* and use of expressions like *unnia*, markers indicating that ‘it is told that’; repetitions in form and content: *Ungoorsimavaa*, *ungoorsimavaa* (OLSEN 1998:90); *Ingerlasimavoq*, *ingerlasimavoq* (...) *Pisimavaa*, *pisimavaa* (*ibid.*:91); indication of localities and non-fictional persons in order to underline the truth value of the story told (cf. THISTED 1993, 1994; PEDERSEN 1995, 1998). The narrator is most often a 1st person narrator, who frequently makes a third person tell his or her version in 1st person word-by-word – again to make sure the story transmitted is as close to the truth as possible – the value of a Greenlandic horror story is generally measured by its degree of authenticity.

Another striking feature in these stories, deriving from the oral tradition is short independent ‘inputs’, very short tales, within the main story as can be seen in Steenholdt’s novel from 2001 about a *qivittoq*.

The narrator in first person is explicitly mentioned as being identical with the author, who has been a top politician for a lifetime, both as a member of the Home Rule Government and as one of the two Greenlandic members of the Danish Parliament until few years back. As to ‘inputs’ in the main tale concerning rescuing the *qivittoq* from the

wilderness, there is for instance a passage depicting the relationship between the narrator and the *qivittoq*, where the narrator swift away to another tale. The narrator is bathing the filthy *qivittoq* in a little stream out in the wilderness – with soap, that he has brought from a foreign hotel bathroom. The worried *qivittoq* asks his ‘nurse’ whether he has stolen the soap or not. This triggers a long description of hotels and the luxury you can find there as free shampoo, mini bars, room service and pretty chambermaids (*ibid.*: 78f). The narrator, has clearly two aims: to entertain the reader and to inform the average man about the customs of the man of the world – to which the author apparently reckons himself to be among.



Photo: Birgit Kleist Pedersen, *Ikkattut*, Sept. 2006:”
Qivittut live hidden in the wilderness – asimi ...inuilaami”

Thematically, a wide range of subjects is touched upon across the different sub genres within the Greenlandic horror fiction. In this context I will leave it at just mentioning the most frequent themes and notions, all of which derive from the word of mouth narratives – with certain recurrent wordings and metaphors.

Asi and/or *inuilaaq*, the wilderness, and *nunap timaani*, the inland and unfamiliar places are often where the scary things happen – in the solitude, where all the physical and psychic senses are sharpened and the individual is object to unknown forces. Sounds and whistling from heap of stones, from unusual places, baby cries and unspecified smells from nowhere and the sense of being watched secretly whether it be in the dark, in the inland or in a foreign crowded city restaurant in the middle of the day and the sense of

being shadowed all intensify the sense of thrill. *Oqimangerneq*, getting paralyzed of fear of an extraordinary intensity – is often described as if invisible hands pull you backwards or make it impossible for you to move at all (BRANDT 1981: 99).

Animals behaving like human beings, *inorrootut*, or sledge dogs behaving unusually are described as expressing omens of evil events (cf. OLSEN 1998: 72ff). At the psychological level, the horror fiction circle around themes as struggle between good and bad deriving mainly from Christian concepts, guilt, shame and taboos such as the role of society in relation to *qivittut*, to the sexually different, death, moral and ethics in relation to hunting rules and general conduct of life – fear and anxiety – repression – loneliness – longing – pain – lies – jealousy – physical and emotional transformation including symbiosis – initiation – regression – loss of ego and symbolic death and rebirth and the alter ego – all these themes are to be find in for instance the latest horror fiction Otto Steenholdt's novel, *Inuillisimasup ikioqqunera* (2001), mentioned above – and it is claimed to be a true story. All themes you will recognize from the 'word of mouth' narratives among people.



Photo: Birgit Kleist Pedersen, Nuuk, Jan. 2006.

Hanne & Kirstine, students from Department of Language, Literature & Media trying to revive the least known versions of the best known traditional oral narratives for the public, January 2006

The yearly Cultural Night Festival in Nuuk – partly an event of reviving oral story telling

As I have tried to demonstrate in a narrating manner that ‘word of mouth’ narratives are still very much alive in Greenland. Besides, educational institutions, local museums and libraries around in Greenland occasionally arrange – in different creative ways – story telling events. The yearly Cultural Night Festival draws popular attention to such arrangements. Last year some of my students having just ended a semester on oral story telling tradition turned out to be so excited by all the different versions of tales they only knew a few of until then, that they decided to spend the Cultural Night at Ilisimatusarfik to transmit the *least* known versions of the *best* known tales to the public.

Recently more students have participated in a couple of television shows on story telling, which seems to be increasingly popular among young people.

End remarks

Orality is very much alive in Greenland as said before – the narratives told are of course different from the myths and legends of pre-colonial times, but they are still part of every day life providing different functions:

- As social ‘glue’ – or aesthetic cohesion
- Listening and transmitting narratives help you extend and /or adjust your reservoir of narratives for social purposes
- Narratives function as an exchange of world views – and provide a source for considerations on what is truth or false for whom in a given context
- Narratives help you identifying your cultural belonging, that is your sociocultural identity
- Narratives fulfil the need of mystery
- Narratives provide a kind of relaxing ‘time-out’ from the scheduled ‘time-in’ routines of your every day life.

End of narration – which is of course based on a true story about real persons and real events!

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