

# Inuit Symbolism of the Bearded Seal

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[See table of contents](#)

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Article abstract

The skins of the bearded seal—both dress and interior skins—were indispensable in Inuit/Yupit technology. Converted into straps, thongs, covers, pokes, rain clothing, and underwear, the skins served to make transport possible, facilitate hunting activities, and protect people against wet and stormy weather. Similarly, the same skin objects permitted contact and exchanges with the beings of the Other Worlds, on which the earthly life of humans depended. Symbolic analysis of the characteristics of bearded seal as reflected in ritual, myth, and sayings reveals that bearded seal turns out to bear both frightening and beneficial meanings. Feared in the figure of a bogey at the height of winter, welcomed as the first seal to arrive from a great distance in early spring, inspiring reproduction and protecting Raven in renewing the earth at equinoxes, bearded seal made the Inuit/Yupit world cohere.

# Inuit Symbolism of the Bearded Seal

Birgitte Sonne<sup>i</sup>

## ABSTRACT

The skins of the bearded seal—both dress and interior skins—were indispensable in Inuit/Yupit technology. Converted into straps, thongs, covers, pokes, rain clothing, and underwear, the skins served to make transport possible, facilitate hunting activities, and protect people against wet and stormy weather. Similarly, the same skin objects permitted contact and exchanges with the beings of the Other Worlds, on which the earthly life of humans depended. Symbolic analysis of the characteristics of bearded seal as reflected in ritual, myth, and sayings reveals that bearded seal turns out to bear both frightening and beneficial meanings. Feared in the figure of a bogey at the height of winter, welcomed as the first seal to arrive from a great distance in early spring, inspiring reproduction and protecting Raven in renewing the earth at equinoxes, bearded seal made the Inuit/Yupit world cohere.

## KEYWORDS

Inuit, Yupit, bearded seal, ritual, myth, symbolism, gutskin, *ikiaq*

## RÉSUMÉ

### Symbolisme inuit du phoque barbu

Les peaux du phoque barbu étaient indispensables dans la technologie Inuit/Yupit. Converties en lanières, sangles, housses, vêtements de pluie et sous-vêtements, les peaux servaient à rendre le transport possible, à faciliter les activités de chasse et à protéger les personnes contre les intempéries. Ces mêmes objets de peaux permettaient le contact et les échanges avec les êtres des Autres Mondes, dont dépendait la vie terrestre de l'homme. L'analyse symbolique des caractéristiques du phoque barbu, telle que reflétée dans les rituels, les mythes et les dictons, révèle que le phoque barbu s'avère avoir des significations à la fois effrayantes et bénéfiques. Craint sous la forme d'un spectre au plus fort de l'hiver, accueilli comme le premier phoque arrivé de très loin au début du printemps, inspirant la reproduction et protégeant Corbeau en renouvelant la terre aux équinoxes, le phoque barbu assure la cohérence du monde Inuit/Yupit.

## MOTS-CLÉS

Inuit, Yupit, phoque barbu, rituel, mythe, symbolisme, peau d'intestin, *ikiaq*

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Using symbolic analysis, this article attempts to clarify the multiple meanings of the bearded seal in ritual, myths, sayings, and metaphors across the Arctic.<sup>1</sup> The characteristics of the bearded seal (Muus, Salomonsen, and Vibe 1981, 416–17)—including its large size and weight, its wintering far away beyond the ice edge, and arrival in early spring followed by the other local seal species—are reflected in ritual and myth as its kennings that structure this text. The male’s strong underwater mating call adds libidinous and aggressive kennings to the bearded seal; and the use of its skins for all kinds of objects connect this world with the Other World and permit movement within and between the worlds. As for rituals, one particular figure, Nunagiqsaqtuq, combines bearded seal symbols with those of the raven. Consequently, the analysis must also consider raven symbolism, which, unlike that of bearded seal, is not novel in literature on Inuit.

## Method

Comparisons of facts and ideas about the bearded seal will take us across the entire Inuit/Yupiiit area. I explore their use in everyday practice in ritual, myth, and metaphor. My method is basically identical to the anthropological field study as presented by Jarich Oosten (2006). Whenever relevant, I, like Oosten, look for variations all over the Inuit/Yupiiit field, and I too presuppose that “inside the region the data become mutually interpretative” (Oosten 2006, 61). Relationship in language and prehistory defines the Inuit/Yupiiit area as a “field.” This means that practices, metaphorical references, motifs, and so on that are found among related groups, widely distributed over time and space, represent a common substratum. By “basically” I make a reservation, because the data do not always appear on the same level of explicitness. In many cases, they become mutually interpretative only in the way that explicit connotations or meanings in one locale may offer a key to understanding implicit connotations in another. In other words, variation provides a field of data from which, by inference, one can tease out underlying principles. To this, I add an ethno-historical dimension: “Parallels in themes appear in multiple contexts that inspire interpretations with reference to what else you know about the society, environment, and culture in question” (Sonne 2017, 14).

## The bandaged Raven, Nunagiqsaqtuq

For many, many years, a peculiar figure drawn by one of Franz Boas’s (1901–07, 141–42) informants has puzzled me. The figure is completely bandaged, like a severely injured person right out of hospital, but actually the figure is a shaman,

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1. This article draws on my book *Worldviews of the Greenlanders: An Arctic Perspective* (2017), to which I make several condensed references.

dressed for the Sedna (Sea Woman Nuliayuq) feast at Cumberland Sound in Southwest Baffin Island about 1880.<sup>2</sup> Called Nunagiqsaqtuq (Noonagekshown), “the one who shall beautify the land,” he wears a woman’s hood (*amaut*) raised above his head like a beak; his face is covered by a mask of dog skin, appendices are fastened to his shoulders and heels, and the bandage is cut from a bearded seal’s skin. At the Sedna feast during Boas’s November 1883 stay, this disguised shaman’s task was to pair off men and women for the temporary spouse exchange and to put an end to the feast by scaring people off “the scene” with his sharp pointed hood. He was also said to appear in spring and autumn and bring health and fair weather to people, that is, plenty of food (Boas 1901–07, 141–42).

J.W. Bilby (1923, 222), missionary to Lake Harbour/Kimmirut in 1909,<sup>3</sup> identified Nunagiqsaqtuq as a raven figure that cleans and renews the land at equinoxes by communicating people’s confessions of offences to Sedna. But the dress of this Nunagiqsaqtuq differed from the drawing published by Boas. The head was tightly covered by the skull of a bearded seal supplied with a peak representing a bird’s bill, and he wore a medley of unspecified garments. The garments invite no analysis, and my Western interpretation of the skull as representing death may be wrong. But the identification of Nunagiqsaqtuq with Raven and the procurement of confessions to Sedna are useful for analyzing the bandaged Nunagiqsaqtuq. The identification explains his appendices as a raven’s wings and claws, and his mediation of confessions is confirmed by contemporary Inuit, according to Laugrand and Oosten’s (2015, 102–05) meticulous analysis of Raven’s kennings. The mask of dog skin refers, I think, to the dog guarding the house of Sedna, whereas the meaning of the bandage, an entire skin cut in a spiral into one unbroken strap, appears a mystery. Yet the East Greenland mythic Uniagaq offers a key.

To sum up the roles performed by Nunagiqsaqtuq, he presides over the ritual exchange of women, he ends the Sedna ceremony by scaring people with his “beak,” and, twice a year, he, as an intermediary of confessions to Sedna, removes the dirty effects of taboo breaks committed in the preceding half-year. To this list we can add the idea held by Boas’s informants that the land turns around at equinoxes (Boas 1901–07, 131) and somersaults renew the world (see Sonne 2017, 75–77), which also corresponds with both the “cleaning” and the statement communicated by Saladin d’Anglure (1990, 108) that the spring equinox meant the suspension of the taboos that were in force during the winter.<sup>4</sup>

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2. Boas ([1888] 1964, 194–98) did not himself observe the entire course of events at the feast; he did witness the *Qallunaat* throwing trinkets at the end (Laugrand and Oosten 2002, 207; Müller-Wille 1998, 137).

3. Bilby was missionary to Ummanarjuak (Blacklead) from 1898 to 1906.

4. Information is meagre on equinox ritual in autumn, which in most parts of Greenland would coincide with freeze-up, when families moved into a common winter settlement. A moving-in ritual *séance* performed September 26, 1884, which ended with a ritual wife exchange, was claimed to be the custom of all East Greenlanders (Thalbitzer 1933, 68–69).

## Uniagaq

The shaman Ajijak (first part of the nineteenth century) received the story from the “horse’s mouth”: his helping spirit Uniagaq. This Uniagaq, who belongs to the outermost island, was living on the mainland when suddenly the earth began to capsize and turn around. At that point, both he and his younger brother, orphans who were fed but given no clothing, decide to get out and run up the rising bottom of the sea towards the light—that is, in the opposite direction of the people who take to the mountains. But because they need clothing to go outdoors, Uniagaq finds some coiled up straps cut from discarded blubber pokes. He winds a long broad strap around the upper body of his younger brother, dresses himself the same way, and along they run, on dry land in continuous daylight, all the way to the outermost island. In this desolate place, they start to wish for things to use. From invisible hands they thus receive driftwood, an axe and a knife for making the skeleton of a kayak, skins for cover, a woman who, arrives from out of the blue, and finally her tools for the covering. In my understanding, the brothers have embarked on fresh development of Inuit culture on the turned-around earth. Proceeding with this task, Uniagaq winds off their “clothing,” ties the two straps together, and fastens one end to the kayak. He then has his younger brother enter and begin to practice kayaking, while Uniagaq sees to his balance by holding the other end of the strap. Soon, the younger brother becomes an excellent seal hunter, while Uniagaq himself remains a hunter of eiders in sheltered waters. As a consequence of his sibling’s hunting ability (I suppose), Uniagaq lets his younger brother marry the woman; but he then falls in love with her. She turns him away, so he casts a spell on her that rebounds and ruins his hips (Sonne 2005, ID 1678).<sup>5</sup> Being no sealer, he cannot marry as a genuine human.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, he can assist his master, Ajijak, in hunting seals by pressing them down under water until they suffocate and become easy prey.

Implicitly, Uniagaq mirrors Nunagiksaqtuq in being a raven. Like Raven’s mythic task of bringing light into the primordial dark world (Laugrand and Oosten 2015), Uniagaq chooses the way towards light for his flight—and a fresh beginning. He trains his younger brother to become an able hunter at sea, while he himself never exceeds being an eider hunter, who does not know how to catch seals, except to help Ajijak. Indeed, the raven is no seabird. In a pan-Inuit myth, as a son-in-law of some geese, Raven gets tired out during their autumn migration, drops to the sea, and is drowned. Raven flies over land, along the coast braving storms in a low flight and gravitation as a master of balance,

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5. Sonne (2005) refers to my database of about 2,300 Greenlandic stories in Danish. Each ID number of the database offers archival information, a summary of a published story, or a Danish translation if the story has not been published. The guide is in both Danish and English.

6. The proven ability to catch seal was the Inuit admission to marriage.

somersaulting in the air. But on the ground he limps, as reflected in the bad hip Uniagaq receives when courting his brother's wife. Being no sealer, Uniagaq cannot marry and is thus on the margins of society.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, in real life, ravens should remain outside human habitation. Stories are told about the paralyzing fear a stray raven in the entrance tunnel evokes among the inmates of a house because, if it enters the living room, it will suffocate everybody by puffing its feathers (Rasmussen 1938, 168–69; Sonne 2005, ID 2009; 2017, 82). In myth, Uniagaq similarly suffocates seals for Ajijak to catch. There is too much air in Raven. He is a *sila* (out-of-doors) bird; he is of air and light, in a transitional state. He definitely belongs in heaven, not in the world below the sea (Sonne 2017, 80–85, 384–86). Uniagaq's means for teaching his little brother how to kayak balance—namely, their bandaged clothing cut from blubber pokes—parallels Nunagiksaqtuq's bandage to the complete skins of bearded seal cut into one unbroken strap. We shall return to the connotations of this clothing in due course. At the moment, it is safe to conclude that in recreating Inuit culture after the turning around of the earth, Uniagaq mirrors Raven, the culture hero of Alaska and Northeast Siberia.

## The useful bearded seal

The multiple uses of bearded seal (*Erignathus barbatus*) in the Eskimo pre-cotton and -plastic culture are well known and listed in many publications (e.g., Jensen 1987). The meat, except dried or fermented, was used mostly as dog food, but its skins—the solid outer cover as well as the interior semi-translucent guts—were indispensable in Inuit/Yupit technology.<sup>8</sup> More hard-wearing and larger than skins of the other species, the cover of the bearded seal, the biggest seal in the Arctic, was the preferred material for producing most skin objects. Only walrus could compete.

When butchering a bearded seal, the skin can be removed in different ways: in one uncut bag for buoys and pokes; split along the longitudinal line of the front and then skinned for tents, *umiaq*, and kayak covers; and from one end to the other, the entire skin can be cut in a spiral into one unbroken strap. These unbroken straps were used for a variety of purposes: bowstrings for drilling fire and hunting caribou, harpoon and towing lines that connected hunter with prey; ties for tightening clothing and bags, and for all means of transport, viz. bootlaces and whiplashes for driving forth the dogs as for their traces; thongs for lashing sleds and skeletons for *umiat* and kayaks. For boot soles, the skin of bearded seal was preferred above any other.

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7. Laugrand and Oosten (2015, 110) draw the same conclusion about Raven.

8. One anonymous peer reviewer, drawing on his/her fieldwork on Baffin Island, adds that bearded seal meat, especially blubber, is considered highly medicinal for open wounds, skin problems, earache, and the flu.

The disemboweled guts, stomach, bladder, and sometimes also gall bladder were set apart. They were cleansed and dried, and the Southwestern Yupiit, who considered the urine bladder of all slain mammals to be the container of its soul for reincarnation, honoured these bladders at the New Year Bladder Feast. At the end of the feast, the bladders were returned to their proper milieu (sea or land) with a plea for the seal to come back next year. The dried guts are still used for anoraks/parkas (rain- and wind-coats), underwear, and formerly as window panes, the “eyes” of the house, which let in daylight and give out lamplight into the dark. The stomach is useful for a drum skin or a container, while the gall bladder might serve as an amulet.

Thus, taken together in the abstract, the driving factors for multiple uses of the bearded seal were to connect, to protect, and to facilitate movement (see also Laugrand and Oosten 2006). In a wider sense, on the ritual-symbolic level, the same lashings, lines, and whipcords were decisive for connection and travel between this world and the Other World. *Qilaneq*, the common divinatory method for asking the Other World a question by shamans and ordinary people alike, was performed by means of a thong fastened in one end to a rod and the other end to some part of a person’s body, such as the head of a patient. When, in reaction to a question, the head grew heavy, this mute answer was affirmative. In a single but interesting instance, this thong was identified with the umbilical cord by late Aupilaarjuk (of Nunavut). Practising *qilaneq*, he would refer to his younger brother in the spirit language as his baby-fellow because they were tied together by the umbilical cord to their common *pooq*, that is, their mother (Saladin d’Anglure 2001, 15).<sup>9</sup> In daily speech, *pooq* means any kind of a bag, the pokes cut by Uniagaq included. And since also Uniagaq and his brother were tied to the same mother, I take Uniagaq’s combining their straps into one line to symbolize this idea of a common umbilical cord. In the same line of thought, the Greenland travelling hero Kivioq comes upon a maelstrom at the centre of the sea, called its navel (Sonne 2005, ID 1878, 1478, 595), with some water-filled intestines of bearded seal in front (Rasmussen 1981, 3:135; Sonne 2005, ID 595;) Also this metaphor echoes an umbilical cord, which not only points to the idea of the sea as a pregnant stomach, but also to a possible connection of bearded seal to Sea Woman.

The gutskin parka was donned by participants in Yup’ik ceremonies (Fienup-Riordan 1994), by practising Iñupiat and Yupiit shamans (Merkur 1985, 259) and, named *ikiaq*, also by some East Greenlandic shamans (Sonne 2017, 351–52). Boot soles were necessary for shamans who travelled by gliding<sup>10</sup> and

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9. Apparently their common, deceased mother offered the mute answers.

10. Gliding was an alternative shamans’ way of travelling. The “glider” was not bound up like a “flyer” but often dressed in skin boots and *ikiaq*. The glider is predominantly associated with travelling to the realms of the sea below (Sonne 2017, 299–303), and the flyer to the heavenly realm of death, Moon, Sun, and faraway countries (Thalbitzer 1933, 87).



thongs were necessary for lacing up shamans for spirit flight. These thongs sometimes dropped from heaven to the floor in ingenious figures or teared about like some live whiplash (Kublu and Oosten 1999, 125; Rasmussen 1929, 129–31; Saladin d'Anglure 2001, 86–87, 156–59; Sonne 2005, ID 1674, 1673; 2017, 125–26, 311–12, 319). A magic cord with similar tearing about on the surface of the sea gave East Greenlandic shaman Maratsi (1844–1923, baptized Noa in 1912) access to either otherworldly realm, below and above (Sonne 2005, ID 2292). The travel in spirit is further connoted by the *makkortaq*, a piece of bearded seal skin for boot soles, stretched out in the palm and tapped by the East Greenlandic shaman as a technique of ecstasy (ID 561). In short, objects produced from skins of the bearded seal provided connection, protection, and movement within this world and also between this and the Other World.

## This and the Other Worlds

“The Other World” is my short hand abstraction for several Other Worlds whose beings, nonhumans, *Allanat* (Others) of Greenland and Canada speak a common language (Boas 1901–07, 350–54; Rasmussen 1930, 73–80; 1932, 110–11; O. Rosing 1957–61, 1:86–96; Victor and Robert-Lamblin 1989–93, 2:252–63). *Taartaq*, “of darkness,” was not known by shamans alone. Ordinary people could learn *taartaq* during performances where, at the moment the shaman went into ecstasy, both he and the arrived spirits spoke only *taartaq*. Although archaic, metaphoric, and sometimes of direct opposite meaning, their words are understandable.<sup>11</sup> They express the spirits’ understanding the world, which, from my academic point of view, reveals Inuit perspective of the perspective of the *Allanat* on Inuit.

The Other World was seen and travelled involuntarily in dreams by ordinary people while shamans mastered techniques for doing both at will. The invisible interior of humans was similarly an Other World, visible to shamans and spirits alone. Responsibility for keeping up harmonious relations (by observance of rites and taboos) rested with humans alone. Mishaps due to broken rules were figured out by the shamans, the intermediaries between the two worlds.

The foreshore offered an earthly meeting point of the worlds, in that access was possible from here to either realm of death, above and below. In case the body was first placed right above the high mark of the tide for three days and then thrown into the sea, its *tarneq* (transmigrating soul) could travel between the two realms at will. This idea may have been new, conceived in East Greenland as a reaction to the Lutheran Christian message about eternal afterlife, which was to be lived exclusively in one world, above or below. Because an eternal life cut off from beloved relatives was no happy prospect, a solution was apparently

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11. See Therrien (1987) for a revealing comparison of body parts in ordinary language and *taartaq*.



required. By sticking to the then common local practice and idea that burial on the land meant a way to heaven and into the sea to the realm below, the stepwise burial did the trick (Rasmussen 1921–25, 1:81; Rasmussen KRH 52, 2, booklet 405, between p. 4 and 5; Rasmussen 1938, 79; see also Sonne 2017, 167).

## **Celebrating bearded seal in ritual**

Besides the ritual of cleaning the land at equinoxes by Nunagiksaqtuq—the raven dressed in bearded seal lashings—several rituals focused on bearded seal. The advent in early spring was particularly marked at Cape Prince of Wales (Seward Peninsula) and on Nunivak Island (in the Bering Sea), where an elaborate kayak-launching ritual was carried out by every hunter and his family in anticipation of the first bearded seal. Rites and rules were strictly followed regarding the ways each first catch was handled, how parts of the blubber were distributed among children and the Elders, and how both the urine bladder and head were treated with special care (Lantis 1946, 193–34; 1947, 38). On Nunivak Island the hunter with the greatest number of bearded seals caught during the year was accorded the prestigious title of “best hunter,” and a young man’s first catch of bearded seal made him, when initiated at the subsequent Bladder Feast, a hunter—that is, an adult in relation to game (Lantis 1946, 248). Furthermore, the valuable skin of bearded seal served as the monetary unit of internal trade on Nunivak Island (Pratt 1990, 83).

At the opposite end of our Inuit/Yupit “field,” the less “wealthy,” socially less structured and ritually less elaborate East Greenlanders at Tasiilaq/Ammassalik celebrated the first spring catch of bearded seal in a less splendid but significant way. People from all over the region came to cut a part the animal. (The three days of taboo before flensing permitted the rumour of the catch to spread and people to arrive in time.) The bearded seal was literally plundered, apart from the head and breast, which belonged to the hunter (Holm [1888] 1914, 49). This rough treatment can, by the region-wide competitive sharing, be seen as a grateful act of welcome that honoured this animal herald of early spring.

## **The bearded seal bogey**

As the person to scare away the participants of the Sedna feast in winter, Nunagiksaqtuq is acting in the role of a bogey. But another bogey appears to be a pan-Inuit ritual figure around the New Year, when the still distant bearded seal came on a visit as an aggressive, libidinous bogey symbolizing the threats of winter. On the penultimate day of the Nunivak Bladder Feast, the annual celebration of caught game’s bladders at the end of the year, three seals appeared one after another as bogies from the entrance tunnel of the men’s communal house and house for ceremonies (*qasgiq*). The women were placed inside the tunnel and the small children were covered up under their clothing in a corner,

before the old men invited the bogies with their singing. The first to appear was a rare species of seal. It wore an object—usually a mitten—atop its head, said to represent its young. The second figure represented a male bearded seal, which pretended to attack the suspended bladders and, like the former spirit, rape the women sitting close together in the tunnel, who yelled piercingly. The third, a female bearded seal with its young, pretended to eat the small children, who at this point were being hustled down into the tunnel. They yelled from fear, and it took the small children several Bladder Feasts to realize the true identity of the seal figures (Lantis 1946, 186; 1960). Although the sexual and carnivore threats of these seal figures are easily read, they do not betray any particular motivations. Yet a corresponding myth informs us about the third, carnivore bogey.

The story has some children playing alone in the *qasgiq* (the house of the men and boys over five, also the house of ceremonies). The children's noise attracts Itqiirpak ("great fire"),<sup>12</sup> a giant hand, with a mouth in the palm and on each finger. It emerges from the deep ocean, crimson like the sun on the horizon, travels to the surface, enters the house, seizes and devours every child except a clever guy hiding under the cover of a pit at the entrance hole. The adults take vengeance by attracting Itqiirpak with a lot of noise and have the giant's fingers guillotined. Darkness follows immediately; no one can verify the results, but when daylight returns they find only ice instead of a hand (Fienup-Riordan 1994, 85, 146–47). Darkness and ice point to wintertime.

The identity of Itqiirpak is not explicated in the story, but, looking to the Canadian Inuit and Greenlandic versions, it is a bearded seal person. In Greenland the phonological equivalent of Itqiirpak, Innersuaq, "Big Fire," is similarly seen as a strong light approaching across the sea. It scalds all the noisy children, except the smart boy, to death. If specified, the figure's weapon is either a whip with a whole bearded seal as its lash (Sonne 2005, ID 1529, 1552, 660), an accompanying bearded seal (ID 661), a piece of wood to which is fastened a skinned bearded seal (ID 1334), or he is himself a composite bearded seal with an indefinable animal as the lower part of the body. The adults cause him to return by making noise, and at the point he arrives on the threshold from the entrance tunnel to the living room, they scald him to death.

In Canadian Inuit versions the bogey arrives from afar and, apart from the Natilik children who climb some snow blocks, it kills them off with his bearded seal weapon. This is a club or a whip with the lash of a whole bearded seal or, in the Mackenzie version, a bag of a complete bearded seal skin filled with ice. The following day, as among the Cupiit, this bag, left in the entrance tunnel, is shown to be flat with melting ice (Rasmussen 1942, 130–32). In Canada the name is not an equivalent to Innersuaq/Itqiirpak; the monster is called Anautalik, "the one with (-lik) the club (*anautaq*)" among both the Aivilingmiut in the late nineteenth century (Boas 1901–07, 497–98) and the Mackenzie/Inuvialuit in 1923

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12. Likely some star?

(Rasmussen 1942, 130–32). Way back in 1822–23, Lyon’s informants at Iglulik named Anautalik the father of Sea Woman. He was said to be a benevolent, small figure who lived apart in his own splendid house with a ferocious guard of polar bear and walrus. He controlled the game of the land. Unfortunately, no comment is made on the use of his *anautaq* (Lyon 1824, 363–64). Yet a century later, in 1922–23, among the descendant Iglulingmiut, the now named Unatautilik (“the man with the whip”), lives in his daughter’s house, where he pinches or tickles deceased humans with a knife (*savik*) or claw-like nails for their sins (Rasmussen 1929, 217–18). The model for this punishing figure is most likely the Devil of Christianity introduced by the Catholic mission in 1912 at Chesterfield Inlet (Sonne 1990; 2017, 358–59, 409). Returning to the bogey proper, he has no name in the Nattilik version (Rasmussen 1931, 247), but he is, like in Greenland, tricked to return by the bereaved adults and scalded to death as they tip boiling water or seal oil over him. Evidently, this pan-Inuit story (likely staged in a winter or New Year ritual) serves as a *memento mori* to the children, who, by making noise, were commonly said to scare away the seals.

A description of the scaring ritual proper, like the one on Nunivak Island, is not, to my knowledge, found as separate text or drawing or taped story for Canada and Greenland, but only as references to winter and feasting in versions of the myth. Most Greenlandic versions state that the adults have gone (ritually) feasting in another house, leaving the children alone (Sonne 2005, ID 121, 237, 660, 661, 1024, 1334, 1529, 1552, 1599, 1734). In an East Greenland version the children or adults play bogey without any shaman to protect them, but as they are armed with sticks, they will know how to defend themselves in case the play comes true (Sonne 2005, ID 1343). The Iglulik and Mackenzie/Inuvialuit versions have the event take place in the winter feast house, *qassi*. The above mentioned bag with melted ice is found in the Inuvialuit entrance tunnel, while in Iglulik Unatautilik’s live whip is killed by the adults. He disappears and has never since been a disturbance to the winter festival.<sup>13</sup> The anonymous Nattilik bogey, which scares the noisy children into climbing out of reach inside an ordinary house, proceeds next to the (ritual) *qassi*, where it is scalded to death. Still, as among the Iglulingmiut, the whip is identified as a live bearded seal. It remains alive, crawling about the floor, and is stabbed to death (Rasmussen 1931, 247). Indeed, and as mentioned above, to have lashings or a whiplash whirl around on the floor was a common shaman’s trick.

## The threats of winter

The demonstration of the skin bag with the melting ice left in the entrance tunnel reminds one of the remains of Yup’ik Itqiirpak—the big fire turned into ice. Since the kill “creates” the darkness of night, both bogies seem to have represented winter at its height, threatening with death by starvation. Indeed,

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13. “Never” is a strong word in regard to ritual killing at annual ceremonies.

as implicated in the story, children are the first to surrender. In South Baffin Island restricted darkness is permitted because a female Anautalik, a benevolent divinatory spirit, demands a darkened room, a common requirement, at every shaman's performance (Boas 1901–07, 497).

A Greenlandic variant in two versions also turns out to be a myth of origin: the beginning of mussels. They originate from the genitals of a woman who either slides them off on the back of the killed bogey lying in the tunnel as she escapes, or she cuts them off after she escapes (Sonne 2005, ID 1334, 660). Her escape symbolizes a difficult birth; the interior of the house is analogous to a woman's womb, and the tunnel, therefore, is analogous to a woman's vagina (e.g., Saladin d'Anglure 1986; Sonne 2018). The metaphor is common in Inuit/Yup'ik origin myths, because a birth, like any initiation process, creates something new.

But there is more to this mussel, which signals starvation. Mussels and seaweed used to be a last resort in times of need. Rasmussen (1938) recorded this directive: "When you have removed the meat and throw away the shell, you are to burst into a loud laugh, or there will be no seals to catch" (81). This saying likely means that if this inferior food was appreciated, it would insult the seals, who love to be thanked. About the other starvation food, seaweed, the saying goes that "When one eats seaweed, no thanks need be said for the meal, for seaweed is eaten only when hunting is bad" (196).<sup>14</sup>

We have seen bearded seal signify carnivore aggression towards humans, libertine assaults, winter overpowered ritually at its most dangerous, creative powers for both cultural (ritual darkness), and ambiguous nutrient (mussels) origins, as well as the returned life-renewing hunt in spring. These themes recur in the remaining Inuit/Yup'ik characteristics of the bearded seal.

### **Qununiq, prophetic bearded seal**

The central position of bearded seal in Yup'ik Alaska was further underlined in its association with the lifespan of humans. A figure called Kunuuneq (Qununiq) would emerge dressed in five gutskin coats but transform into a two-year-old bearded seal if harpooned by a kayaker. "It is ordinary people...rather than shamans who meet the Sea Man. He should be treated in a special way: three times the hunter must pretend that he will harpoon the Sea Man, whereupon the latter transforms himself into a bearded seal, which the hunter can kill without risking his life" (Sonne 1988, 109–10). Yet the attempt was a daring one, because the moment of transformation foretold the lifespan of the hunter (Fienup-Riordan 1994, 83; Jacobson 1984; Lantis 1946, 199). Maybe this figure was actually represented in some ritual by a shaman, whose dress code for visiting the seals in their villages below, similarly made up five gutskin parkas.

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14. "Clams (*amumajut*) are associated with male genitalia" in Inuktitut (anonymous peer reviewer).

If so, one can easily imagine how *only some* hunters present would tempt Providence and answer the invitation to harpoon the prophetic figure. Besides this role, Qununiq was said to influence the tide (Himmelheber 1980, 30; 2000, 107–08; Sonne 2017, 354, 386), and the beneficial relation is acknowledged in a drawing of Qununiq with its long hair and signs of exchange with humans—namely, boots and mittens made from its skin (Sonne 1988, 109).

## Prominent characteristics of bearded seal in Greenland

The bearded seal's mid-winter distant stay in open waters and its mating call in early spring are pronounced phenomena in Greenland ritual and myth.

### Long distance

In winter, when thick ice covers the sea, the bearded seal withdraws to the open waters beyond the ice edge. How very far away seems reflected in the previously mentioned bearded seal guts encountered by Kivioq in front of the maelstrom, “the navel of the sea” at its centre. Another impressive example is the story “Tunutoorajik,” the “Little East Greenlander,” who has taken refuge with the one-legged Ittuku on the latter's distant island. The winter sets in and grows extremely severe; Tunutoorajik's pee drops down in crystals, and no game is available. At winter's climax, however, one-legged Ittuku walks the sea ice alone for a long, long distance, which Tunutoorajik cannot think of matching. Ittuku returns the same day or night with the intestines of a bearded seal, caught in the open water at the ice edge (Sonne 2005, ID 1325). Apparently, since in Greenland lore the one-legged *illukut/ittukut* (“half-persons” vertically cut) are *inuait* of stars (ID 103, 1782, 1977, 2329), I take it that Ittuku has the star's power to travel across the entire land and ice-covered sea in a night.<sup>15</sup> I also see a correspondence between these intestines beyond the distant ice edge and the “umbilical” cord at the navel of the sea encountered by Kivioq. And still another image fits the connection by intestines leading to womb of the sea in the distinction made by the Iglulingmiut between ordinary and very great shamans. The former had a long and perilous way to go, whereas the latter travelled at great speed directly into her house through a tube-like passage kept open by all his dead namesakes (Rasmussen 1929, 126). In my understanding, the passage is a slimy gut, the speed is due to a farting wind, and the dead namesakes point to the continuation of life through naming within the symbolism of birth.

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15. The Greenland hero who saves the settlement from starving to death by his catch of a bearded seal covers a similarly enormous distance (Sonne 2005, ID 1486, 39, 397, 224).

## The mating call in ritual, myth, and legend

When the bearded seal returns full body in early spring, the mating call of the male is, although bellowed underwater, impressive.<sup>16</sup> In East Greenlandic spelling, and to the best of my hearing (Sonne 2017, 297–88, 353), it sounds like *ululoo* (English ooloolo-o). In ritual and myth, the call is combined with one or more characteristics of bearded seal, which are long distance, heavy weight, sex, sexual heat, and spring as the melting of an icy winter. The examples are East Greenlandic supplied with one from Nunivak.

### Libidinous bearded seal

Besides the bearded seal bogies of the Nunivak Bladder Feast, the libidinous kenning is recognized in the song of an East Greenland *uaajeertoq* (pl. *uaajeertut*), a drum-song-dancer of the New Year mask dances. He entices a female bearded seal by the male's mating call, kills it, and exclaims, "Ha, I shall repair (the skin of) my *umiaq*!" After which he sings, dancing, "here is a great barb" (for a covetous woman to accept); that is, he asks whomever it would please among the women to offer him a piece of bearded seal skin. This great barb, Thalbitzer (1923) explains, is "literally the upright bone peg of the throwing board which fits the corresponding groove in the dart (*qaquiseq*), but also generally used of any upright peg or barb; very commonly of the *membrum erectum*" (296). In other words, this *uaajeertoq* dancer, who by the decoy signal entices a female bearded seal and has it killed, secures for himself the skin needed for repairing his *umiaq*. And with the big barb, he invites whomever it pleases among the women to play the part of the booty. The woman, who then hands him the wished-for skin, has accepted to lie with him during the following "putting out of the lamps" (wife exchange).<sup>17</sup>

### The ululoo-calling helping spirit

Some shamans owned a helping spirit whose habit it was to call out *ululoo*. Kaarali Andreassen<sup>18</sup> tells a legend about a travelling party, caught in the pack ice and saved by such a shaman. In the midst of distress, he has this spirit arrive with a thundering sound and start to cleave a channel in front of his kayak at the head of the *umiaq*. By and by, a lead opens right onto shore. The spirit's sound alone is heard; even when emerging right beside the *umiaq*, there is no

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16. For a video of the bearded seal's mating call, see and listen to the video "Unbelievable Song of the Bearded Seal," on YouTube (posted by Holley Muraco, May 18, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sL5Sr7U-LpM>).

17. Georg Quppersimaan (1889–1973, baptized 1915) describes the preludes and acting out of the "putting out of the lamps" (*qaminngarneq*) enjoyed as being both very fun and useful—for reproduction (Sonne 2017, 120; Qúpersimân 1972, 147).

18. Kaarali/Kârale Andreassen (1890–1933) was the chief East Greenlandic informant for Knud Rasmussen (Sonne 2017, 27–30).



mention of seeing him (Andreassen 1961). This spirit can be no other but a bearded seal, which remains unseen while calling and, in heat, melts its way through the ice. A striking counterpart to this icebreaker is encountered in the origin story of bearded seal on Nunivak. It is told in the commentary to the spirit of a mask called Maklakuaq, who used to be a big stone far out at sea. Locked by his weight to the bottom of the sea, he saw seals pass by and got an intense wish to be like them. His desire grew first a face, then limbs, then hair all over, and finally he penetrated the water to rise to the surface for his very first breath and swam with the others (Sonne 1988, 47, 164n42). Obviously, the original place of bearded seal far out at the bottom of the sea reflects its long distance kenning; the hair, its hairy skin; and its former life as a stone, both its impressive weight and the penetrating way it breaks the surface, that is, its birth into this world.

Long distance is particularly stressed in the story about how East Greenland Maratsi used the ululoo-calling spirit for getting rid of his murdered enemy's soul. After two unsuccessful attempts, he eventually has one of his helping spirits fetch the soul and deport it across the sea; then, at the victorious call of the ululoo spirit, the soul was burst into a blob of blood at the horizon (Sonne 2005, ID 1695). Seemingly, no other helping spirit could travel this distance, which ends at *sillia*, translated by some into the Milky Way and by others as the horizon. It separates, by a deep cleft, the Other World from this world in the same way as the cut made along the longitudinal line of the front of a slain animal into symmetrical halves (Schultz-Lorentzen 1927).<sup>19</sup> This *sillia* was also the distant goal of the initiation to an *angakkoq puulik*, a “shaman with a bag” (pl. *angakut puullit*).

## Angakut puullit

The *angakkoq puulik* tradition was limited to East and Southeast Greenland, from where it was brought to the southern parts of the west coast during migration in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (see Sonne 2017, 330–31).

For the initiation to an *angakkoq puulik*, the candidate sees two flames arriving from the horizon that transform into a polar bear and a walrus. Then the polar bear enters the house, seizes the candidate, and carries him to the shore. Here the walrus lay waiting, and the two of them, walrus and polar bear, throw the candidate by his genitals—like a ball in a relay race—across the sea to *sillia*, the Milky Way/horizon. From here he was supposed to find his way back alone, reduced to a skeleton, but picking up his flesh, piece by piece all along the way back. Akku's (ca. 1843–1891) success in going through these painful events was hailed in the end by an ululoo-calling spirit (J. Rosing 1963, 245–47; Sonne 2005, ID 1683). The same ululoo calling also ended Missuarnianga's (1862–1910, baptized Andreas 1899) obvious *puulik* initiation,

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19. See *sivdleq/silleq* in Schultz-Lorentzen (1927).



his last impressive séance, of two days in calling forth the light of the bear on the horizon, and still a third for being seized by the bear, carried outside and then, much later in the day, to return from a point far out at sea (Sonne 2005, ID 1313). Naaja (late eighteenth century) tried but did not succeed. He got scared by his lack of a spirit to accompany him all the way to *sillia* (Sandgreen 1967, 1:120; Sonne 2005, ID 1203). My qualified guess is that Naaja lacked an ululoo-calling spirit.

### Time for the *angakkoq puulik* initiation and its gain

As for dating the *puulik* initiation, all descriptions point to winter, and in-depth analysis suggests that its animal actors—polar bear and walrus—can be identified with Aassuutit (Aagjuk) (Sonne 2017).<sup>20</sup> These twin stars mark the New Year for most Inuit by their appearance around the winter solstice and by their disappearance in April, the onset of spring in East Greenland. Accordingly, the ululoo (mating) call at the end of a successful initiation to an *angakkoq puulik* forebodes or signifies the end of the bearded seal's starvation kenning from New Year to spring. The gain earned by *angakkoq puulik* is protection against aggressive beings, and the *pooq* gained refers to its meaning of “mother” in *taartaq*, the language of the Other World. So, the protection obtained is the invisibility of a fetus inside its mother's womb. The same protection was had by the person born inside its caul, the unbroken membrane named a *pooq* as well. Preserved as an amulet, the caul turned its owner invisible to aggressive beings, such as historic Kuungaseq to an upright polar bear ready to attack and several heroes in myth. The bear became confused and jogged away. In myth the giant falcon and similar aggressors lose sight of the hero, whose very first dress, frequently an *ikiaq*, did the trick (Sonne 2017, 5n6; 2005, ID 379, 517, 519, 1447).

### **Puuat: Caul, *ikiaq*, and mother**

The likeness between a caul and an *ikiaq* is striking. The gutskin dress is semi-translucent, it protects against rain and wind in daily use, and, as shown above, against dangerous beings of the Other World in ritual and myth. A baby born in its caul was considered a lucky child with inborn talent for becoming an *angakkoq*, a shaman, who as a pupil was frequently attacked, sometimes “killed” by potential helping spirits (Sonne 2005, ID 851). As underwear, especially for children, the *ikiaq* was most probably also meant as a protection during the early vulnerable years. In mythic consequence, not only the caul as an amulet but also the person's very first dress made its wearer invisible to aggressors, as noted above.

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20. See index entry for Aassuutit in Sonne (2017, 449).

The first “dress” of Uniagaq and his brother are not *ikiat*, but has all the same protective *puuat*, as does Nunagiksaqtuq, a raven dressed in bearded seal lashings, who appears protected from top to toe.

## Shamans in gutskin parkas

As mentioned above, generally Inupiat and Yupiit shamans practised in gutskin parkas. The participants of the ceremonies in Southwest Alaska wore them as well. Fienup-Riordan (1994, 260) concludes that they served as ritual protection against dangers implicit in the opening during ceremonies of passages from the Other World into this world. Going east, the sources provide little information on shamans in gutskin covers until we arrive in East Greenland. As a rule, the performing Greenlandic shamans wore nothing but briefs, *naatsit*. However, among the last generation of East Greenlandic shamans, Maratsi was dressed in an *ikiaq* for his visit to the submarine realm of death, as was Akku for his. Both put on footwear and travelled by gliding: Akku in a pair of skin stockings, and Maratsi in *kamiks* (boots), which needed repair with new soles en route (Sonne 2005, ID 1697, 1324). Both *ikiaq* and footwear point directly to the bearded seal, the primary supplier of skins for each, and to its association with the deep sea.

## The guts and mating call of bearded seal

The wintering of bearded seal beyond the ice edge was exemplified above by the catch of its guts by the one-legged star-person Ittuku in the story about Tunutoorajik. It testifies, in an awkward way, to the blinding effect on aggressors of the *ikiaq* made from such guts, and it goes like this: After a long travel at sea, Tunutoorajik and his wife lodge with the islander Ittuku, with whom they enter into a wife-exchange relationship. Ittuku, as you will remember, covered an enormous distance across the ice in the midst of winter with the apparent speed of a star across heaven to bring home some bearded seal guts. But the guts are not put to use, although they could have been made into an *ikiaq* for the son of Ittuku and Tunutoorajik’s wife, the outcome of the wife exchange. The son, who has received magic means from his biological father, decides to rescue people on the mainland from two dreadful beings: a monstrous ice-grown polar bear and a giant falcon. The former lives on the deepest bottom of the fjord by breathing through an immense hole in the ice. Its inhale is said to swallow up icebergs and *umiat* (sing. *umiaq*) alike, and its exhale to raise waters in quanta for icebergs to form (Sonne 2005, ID 1325). Ittuku’s son lures the monster with the mating call of the bearded seal. When it emerges, placing one and then the other paw on the ice, it exposes its armpits and Ittuku’s son kills it. In traditional myth a giant bird is similarly killed through its exposed armpits (ID 1187, 1126), but in “Tunutoorajik” the giant falcon immediately grabs and ascends with Ittuku’s son, who tries to escape by slipping his clothes off. But, now stark naked and exposed to the giant falcon, he has its claws once again in his body. The falcon flies him to its nest, where the nestlings are fed by his flesh, torn into

strips. This course of events contrasts tradition, whose hero of this episode invariably “puts on” his protective caul, or his first clothing, which is frequently an *ikiaq*, and becomes invisible to the aggressor (Sonne 2005, ID 379, 674, 1523).

So, why were the bearded seal guts brought back in midwinter by Ittuku rather than made into a life-saving *ikiaq* for his son? As I argue in detail *Worldviews of the Greenlanders* (2017, 365–77), “Tunutoorajik” is an acculturated story that relates, implicitly, the birth, miracles, and death of Jesus Christ. Like the son of Ittuku (whom I take to be a star-person) and the wife of Tunutoorajik, Jesus was fathered by God and born by an earthly woman; he also had to die by offering his flesh for the salvation of the human beings on earth. So Ittuku, like God, although in possession of supernatural powers to change this end, wanted this promise to come true.

Skipping the in-depth analysis of “Tunutoorajik,” which show changes in cosmology due to Christian mission (see Sonne 2017, 366–70), I focus on the parallel change in the story’s bearded seal symbolism. When Ittuku’s son lures the ice-grown polar bear by the bearded seal’s mating call to emerge and expose its armpits for an easy kill, the story sticks to the tradition of the bogey, which symbolizes the threats of peak winter fought and overcome by the adults. The neglect of the intestines, however, which converted into an *ikiaq* could have turned Ittuku’s son invisible to the giant bird, departs from tradition. The implicit connection of these guts to the realm below is made explicit by the “umbilical cord” encountered at the navel-centre of the sea by Kivioq, and implicitly, by the slimy tube of great shamans going full speed unimpeded to Sea Woman. Christianity, however, transformed the underworld of the sea into the place of perdition for which the birth symbolism of bearded seal’s guts apparently had to give in.

### **The bearded seal’s connection to Sea Woman**

Returning to Nunagiksaqtuq and Uniagaq, they still belong within tradition. Nunagiksaqtuq represents, as we know, Raven who cleans the land of dirty breaks of taboo, mediated as confessions to Sea Woman at the turning around of the earth at equinoxes. Similarly, Uniagaq acts, in my interpretation, in accordance with Raven as an Inuit cultural hero in renewing culture after the turning around of the earth. The sources of Nunagiksaqtuq offer no interpretation of the bearded seal lashings of his dress, which, apart from hood and face, cover the entire figure, including wings and claws. Similarly, Uniagaq, in the way of symbolic interpretation, sees to dress himself and his brother, naked like fetuses, in shredded *puuat* (bags, pokes) for leaving the house, an Inuit womb symbol. The birth symbolism is repeated in Uniagaq’s binding together of the straps into a line, like the common umbilical cord of brothers, for training his little brother to become a balanced kayaker. This training reveals Uniagaq’s identity as a raven, the somersaulting master of balance in the air. Furthermore, like Raven, he is no hunter of seals, and, in courting his brother’s wife, he is rightly refused and his

revengeful sorcery is turned back on him. Hit on his hip, Uniagaq, like Raven, limps on the land, but, as a bird of “the out of doors” and air exclusively, Raven’s suffocating effect on people inside houses is feared by humans, while, in the figure of Uniagaq, he can assist his master, Ajijak, in hunting seals by pressing the animals down and out of breath under water.

### The bandaged raven

A simple answer can eventually be given to the question of the part played by the bearded seal lashings of the raven Nunagiksaqtuq in his cleaning of the land. The bandage, cut in a spiral from the entire bag of a bearded seal and reassembled in the coverage, protects Raven, as does the gutskin parka/*ikiaq* that the shaman wears on visits to the maritime Other World. Furthermore, the particular connection symbolized by bearded seal guts from the distant navel of the sea to its womb (*pooq*, “mother”) supports the idea that the bearded seal is the safe mediator to Sea Woman, the Inuit mother of seals. The ritual figure of Nunagiksaqtuq also recognizes the bearded seal’s libidinous and aggressive kennings in his roles of a cobbler, who direct the exchange of wives, and a “bogey,” which scares people off the scene at the end of the Sedna feast. In my understanding, the middle world becomes renewed by the symbolic cooperation of heaven, represented by raven, and the underworld, represented by bearded seal. Nunagiksaqtuq’s mask of dog skin may refer to the aggressive dog guarding Sea Woman’s house, toward which the mediating raven is protected by his bearded seal bag, also a *pooq*.

### Conclusion

The bearded seal’s kennings in ritual and myth evoke a very clear impression of a big, heavy animal, arriving from afar in early spring, bellowing under water, penetrating the surface for a strong inhale, and hereby announcing that its threats as a bogey of winter has come to an end. Its belonging to the maritime underworld is emphasized in Yup’ik Maklakuaq and Qununiq, respectively, the primordial stone at the distant bottom of the sea transformed into a bearded seal of this world and a prophet of lifespans that offers the skins for making the culture work. Among Inuit, the same belonging is emphasized in bearded seal’s umbilical-cord-like connections to the sea’s womb below. In addition to allowing the procurement of skins for daily use, the bearded seal, by letting itself be caught, made possible admissions and relations to animal souls, spirits, and deceased relatives of the Other World, on which the entire life on earth depended.

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