Perception of Life and Death in the Pre-Christian Inuit Society

Figure 1: Migsuarnianguaq gets Angiut as helper spirit.

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Introduction

This paper aims to gain insight to the perception of life and death in the pre-Christian Inuit society of Greenland. This period is somewhat of an enigma as there are but few written sources of this era. The dominant historical records of the Greenlandic Inuit are after the Christianisation of the people, where the past era of perception regarding the cosmological framework and understandings regarding life and death was put in the books of myths and legends. To gain understanding of this perception of the pre-Christian society, this paper will use diverse empirical data from different branches of humanities that was gathered throughout different centuries, where ethnographical records written by expeditionary members of voyages to the north and east of Greenland by Knud Rasmussen (1879-1933) and Gustav Holm (1849-1940) respectively, and anthropological data that has remnants of the pre-Christian period.

The physical remains of the pre-Christian Inuit are located around the harsh arctic landscape of Greenland, where archaeological data can put perspective of the varieties of mortuary practices the people of the past had, and the significance burials holds can be interpreted through the use of the diverse empirical information that was gathered in the ethnographical records of the pre-Christian society. The purpose of this research is to gain understanding of what the Inuit conceptualised regarding life and death, as I believe life and death had a stronghold in the cosmological frameworks of their understanding, and to gain insight to this framework, this paper will also dwell into some of the oral histories regarding mythical stories that has been gathered in the 19th and early 20th century of Greenland, where such stories are still in the consciousness of the Greenlandic Inuit today.

The former discourse held in the scientific fields regarding oral history had held indigenous peoples past as societies without history, as some of the indigenous peoples had no written language (Hanson 2009), the same can be said to the pre-Christian Inuit of Greenland, Greenlandic Inuit had their first written language introduced from the former Moravian *Samuel Kleinschmidt* (1814-1886) in 1851 (Gulløv et al. 2017: 177). The former discourse created by the western world regarding written history, created boundaries towards the perception of history, where oral history passed down from generation to generation since time immemorial, was perceived as having no history. Oral history has such an importance in the society around the coast of Greenland, where indigenous knowledge passed down from through generations can produce data if used in the right context. Sørensen and Knudsen (2019) used oral cultural history passed down to the local people of Narsaq, where they

followed the footsteps of the legend *Qajuuttaq*, with this method they were able to apply ethnohistory of the prehistoric society and put it to context of archaeological excavations and were able to determine settlement patterns with the help of local knowledge of the cultural landscape and oral histories (ibid: 80). As such, oral history can be applied as a methodology, of which this paper hopes to gain empirical data. The theory of this paper is, that oral history together with archaeological and expeditionary reports can be used to gain insight regarding the perception of life and death in the pre-Christian Inuit society.

Mortuary practices & treatment of the dead

Sea burials

In Greenland there were many different traditions regarding burials and beliefs, this paper will look upon few of these. When Inuit first came to Greenland, in the earliest phase also known as *Ruinø* phase, the graves from this period have not been found in the country (Gulløv et al. 2004: 327), and the reason for this may have been that people buried individuals out at sea, where during the winter, they could leave the dead on the sea ice, as has been observed in Canada (Crass 1998: 101), it was also common in both west and east Greenland, there could have been several reasons for leaving the dead out at sea; in the east, it may have been due to a shortage of stones (Crass 1998: 101; Holm 1972: 116), where they either threw or sank the body into the sea, or laid the deceased on the beach where the sea came and embraced it (Grummesgaard-Nielsen 1997: 203; Gulløv et al. 2005: 324) . It could have been easier for the people to bury the individuals out at sea. One must remember that in the early phase when the Inuit first arrived in Greenland, they were likely entirely nomadic and had neither the time nor the inclination to bury people on land. It could be that they did not know the hunting grounds properly and were constantly on the move with the animals. Sea burials could also have been used because the ocean was full of resources, their subsistence economy almost entirely depended on it as Erik Holtved discovered in the island of Ruinø, where Holtved expressed in his journals, that in the hearth of the dwelling would be lighted up with the blubber of the whales during winter nights and the lamps filled with walrus blubber, and a brimming bundle of baleen from the whales were in all stages of being made to tools (Gulløv et al. 2004: 283). Such importance to the sea could have an importance to the early Inuit inhabitants, as in the later period where the ocean still has an important place in the culture. Sea burials were practiced up until the 19th century in east Greenland (Gulløv 2004: 324).

Surface burials

From archaeological findings, we can see that from the 15th century, people began to use many types of different graves. The most typical, as we can also see around the coast, are graves where the body of the deceased are placed directly on the ground with a structure stacked around them. This type of structure is built specifically for the deceased, which then becomes a chamber grave. According to Grummesgaard-Nielsen this type of grave structure is functionally similar to a meat cache, the design of this type of grave is meant to protect the deceased from the scavengers such as dogs and wild animals (Grummesgaard-Nielsen 1997: 203). As the most common type of burial after the 15th century, the Greenlandic people of the past made a decision as to make it observable when passing the grave site in daily life. One source describes that it was because of the good view that the burial location was selected, as it could have been a comforting place for the deceased, where the dead could face the beauty of the sea (Hart Hansen et al. 1985: 70). However, the burial grounds with surface burials could hold a significant representation to the inhabitants of Greenland, to show a territorial claim to the land and to show that was where they had lived and died (Rasmussen 2024). The surface burials could also have another interpretation, it shows along with the territorial claims, that the populace of the island had history to its landscapes, that they had belonged in the country for many generations. This perception of having stories in the surrounding landscape is similar to the natives in British Columbia, where in a modern-day context, fights for legal rights for the land they have had since time immemorial, where an elder said, “If this is your land, where are your stories?” (Hanson 2009).

Caves and rock crevices

Another form of burial used in the past of Greenlandic Inuit was to place people in rock crevices or caves and then close the opening. As Grummesgaard-Nielsen has written, it was common to utilize these locations in the pre-Christian Inuit culture (Grummesgaard Nielsen 1997: 203). These burial sites can, for example, be seen in the area of Sisimiut. These graves are relatively well protected, and they are more difficult to decipher in the landscape since the natural formation of the location has been utilized. One of these burial sites is known throughout Greenland, there was a rock cave situated near Uummannaq, this site contained exceptionally well-preserved mummified individuals, and are known from the name of the location where they had been found, Qilakitsoq. Eight individuals were found, six of whom were women, and the remaining were children (Gulløv et al. 2004: 323). The caves and rock

crevices used as burial sites, is more simplistic in nature, they could merely place their dead in an empty space that would otherwise be left hollow. It can furthermore be speculated, that this type of burial site was a way of getting them to rest and be left alone, unlike the surface burials that protrudes in the landscape.

Dwelling burials

There are three kinds of dwelling burials.
Abandoned dwelling burials: The first type is abandoned dwelling burials. Abandoned dwellings can be an opportunistic way to create a grave. It is opportunistic because it relies on finding an abandoned dwelling. One can imagine that is saves labour, as there is already material present, and the ground may have already been dug, which can be ideal for laying a deceased individual. The abandoned dwellings are either partially collapsed or entirely. In the stratigraphic layer when one is excavating, one can observe disturbed layers where a hole has been made, indicating that someone may have dug into an abandoned dwelling to lay the deceased and then filled the hole back up. Abandoned dwelling graves are rare, though some are found in Greenland (Crass 1998: 92).

Dwelling burials: The second type of burials within dwelling burials are those conducted inside dwelling or at the entrance tunnel. These were carried out within inhabited dwelling. In these burials, a hole was dug into the wall, and then the deceased was placed at the opening, which was then closed. These burials could contain grave goods for the deceased. In this type of burial, multiple burials can be found in one dwelling (Crass 1998: 92f).

Dead dwelling burials: The last type of dwelling burials is dead dwelling burials. These graves can be found around the coast. These graves stem from unfortunate circumstances, such as food scarcity, resulting in families perishing from hunger in their homes. It could also be due to families succumbing to illnesses. Upon discovering the deceased, their families or those who stumbled upon the dwelling with the dead would allow the dwelling to collapse and decay, becoming the final resting place for the deceased. In some cases, the deceased were either laid out in their beds or placed on the floor before the dwelling was collapsed (Crass 1998: 93). Touching a dead person could render one ritually impure, thus necessitating a series of rituals after coming into contact with a deceased individual, which could complicate the life of a pre-Christian Inuit. For instance, there were norms to follow touching

a deceased person, which could last up to a year for women. These rules might include not preparing one's own food or not mentioning game animals (Holm 1972: 116ff)

Treatment of the dead

When burying people, it was customary to accompany them with their belongings in the grave. For example, the women at Qilakitsoq were buried with some very precious and warm garments, ensuring they were well prepared for the afterlife. Hart Hansen et al. writes that a great hunter had various hunting tools with him, such as his kayak, dog sled, and dogs. A woman might bring along her tools with her, such as sewing needles, ulu, and steatite lamps. In case of a child, a dog skull has been had been found by its side, perhaps with the intention that the dog might help and accompany the child to the realm of the dead (Hart Hansen et al. 1985: 69f).

Leg bending

When discovering the deceased from past Greenland, it has been observed that most of the dead are in a flexed position at the knees. Hart Hansen et al. believed that this position could either create space for more individuals in the same grave or perhaps was intended to place people in a fetal position so that they could depart life in the same posture as they entered it the deceased were prepared for a new transitional stage and a new existence (Hart Hansen et al. 1985: 70). Additionally, Grummesgaard-Nielsen noted why they are bent together, it is written that the legs are bent to prevent the corpse from walking again to haunt (Grummesgaard-Nielsen 1997: 206).

There can be many different factors as why the legs are bent in the deceased, and there are no primary sources available.

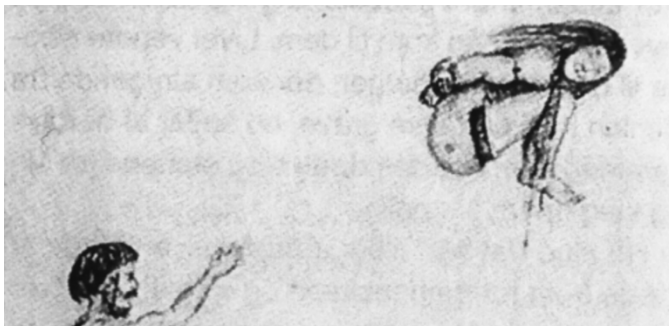

Figure 2: Angakkoq on a soul journey (Engelbrechtsen & Ring 2016).

This is a sketch from Kârale Andreassen (1890-1934) from the east of Greenland. In this drawing, he has sketched an Angakkoq that is going on a soul journey, he must undergo a series of rituals. For example, he must be bound around the body to maintain a fixed position. In this image, we can see that

his legs are also bound and bent. This might suggest that the legs of the deceased were also bent to undergo into their soul journey.

Expeditionary records of pre-Christian Inuit societies in Greenland

The ethnographical data of the pre-Christian Inuit society was gathered by expeditionary voyages, where written sources were generated by Gustav Holm's umiaq expedition to the east of Greenland, and Knud Rasmussen's journey to the north of the island. Their ethnographical records of the Inuit were gathered at a time when explorers and adventurers journeyed to the horizons of their known world, where the imperialistic nature of their voyages was reflected in the notions regarding indigenous peoples, as Smith states

> Many of the earliest local researchers were not formally 'trained' and were hobbyist researchers and adventurers. The significance of travellers' tales and adventurers' adventures is that they represented the Other to a general audience back in Europe which became fixed in the milieu of cultural ideas. Images of the 'cannibal' chief, the 'red' Indian, the 'witch' doctor, or the 'tattooed and shrunken' head, and stories which told of savagery and primitivism, generated further interest, and therefore further opportunities, to represent the Other again. Travellers' stories were generally the experiences and observations of white men whose interactions with Indigenous 'societies' or 'peoples' were constructed around their own cultural views of gender and sexuality. (Smith 2021: 8f)

With Smith's statement in mind, it is important to remember the worldview the expeditionary members had, as the perspective of the natives of the island differed substantially.

Observations of Knud Rasmussen

One of the most influential individuals in recent history of Greenland is Knud Rasmussen, where his numerous voyages of expeditions had raised peoples gaze towards the arctic for future generations to come. Knud Rasmussen was born and raised in the town of Ilulissat situated in the west coast of Greenland, where he stayed until he was sent to Denmark to study in the age of twelve. Rasmussen's education was regarded as not being impressive (Nielsen 2024), and this correlates to Smith's statement where adventurers and researchers were not formally trained. Nevertheless, the data he collected concerning the pre-Christian

society of Inuit in his travels, are substantial in value. Because of his ties to Greenland, he spoke Greenlandic, which was a great aid during his expeditions, which allowed him to gain more information than other foreign expeditionary members could. However, the schooling in Denmark could have influenced his views surrounding the Inuit.

One of Knud Rasmussen's goals was to meet with the mythical people that lived in the northern Greenland, a myth he had heard when talking to an old Greenlandic man, where the old man had heard in his youth that there were Inuit living further north of Greenland. This tale of people living further north was an oral history that had been passed down as he had heard it when he was a child. In this tale there lived a man north of all known settlements, where he lived hunting polar bears during spring season. In one of his hunts he came upon tracks, that did not belong to the people he knew, and had to be strangers tracks, so he followed the tracks the following year and met the remains that were different from what the hunter had known. A later year the hunter set out to meet with the other people with a set of valuable wooden gifts, as wood was a scarce material, and he had seen the remains of their tents that had tusks from walruses as pillars. The hunter did not meet the other people, but when he later returned the wooden materials, he had given the year before had been taken, and a bundle of tusks and a female dog with its puppies had been left behind as a return gift for the hunter (Rasmussen 1945: 7f). This oral history had been passed down to Knud Rasmussen and had the knowledge that there might be people living further north of Greenland, when he began his expedition towards the north, he had in the back of his mind, that there might be people there whom he could meet. During a critical point of the expedition, where food was beginning to get scarce and the members of the expedition were exhausted from the traveling, they came upon a recently habited settlement. They could state that it was recently habited as there was a fresh seal that had already been caught left by the previous occupants. Looking around they came upon a dwelling where one had to crawl before getting inside. While inside, Rasmussen began to fantasise about what sort of people had lived here. He imagined them as a primitive people eating raw meat while the blood dripped down on them. This image he had, came upon him as the dwelling smelled of paganism to him (Rasmussen 1945: 9). This vivid and somewhat grotesque imagery reveals Rasmussen's biases towards the high arctic Inuit he had yet to meet. Rasmussen's perception towards the Inuit and his characterisation of them as primitive suggests a portrayal of the ethnocentric views that was common to explorers and adventurers during his lifetime.

This record of events goes to show, that after the Danish colonisation, there were still branches of Inuit groups that were unaffected by the European culture. Such secluded cultures

would likely have formed their own culture and history to an unknown extent but might still be used to get an insight into Inuit culture before the Christian era.

Knud Rasmussen and his team's journey to the north of Greenland, after being in the dwelling that smelled of paganism to him, they continued their journey and had an encounter with a wife and man, who were the people that Rasmussen had been searching for. The couple would lead them to their settlement, where there were numerous inhabitants. After the arrival of Knud Rasmussen and his fellow expeditionary members, they were met with an Angakkoq. The Angakkoq was in touch with the spiritual world and could commune with the spirits during a ritual. During the transition from spring to summer in the high north of Greenland, the expedition of Knud Rasmussen and his fellow members were in the company of the fabled northern peoples that they had been searching for. Rasmussen observed the tranquil state of the settlement during the transition of seasons, where the people were in a calm presence and perceived the surrounding landscape and its fauna. A sudden interruption came with a single shout where the settlement rushed to where the shout came from. It came from a dwelling where the oldest and respected Angakkoq lived, named *Sagdlork*. Sagdlork had announced that he would commune with the spirits (toornat), as to try and heal his sick wife. The ritualistic norms surrounding the communion with the spirits was observed by Rasmussen, where he describes the whole settlement was to be stationary and remain still when it took place and when Rasmussen arrived to where the people remained stationary he was ordered to not move as well. During this exchange Rasmussen showed that he came from an outsiders perspective, as he walked up towards the dwelling where Sagdlork was situated. He then peeked inside the house through the window and saw the old angakkoq, he told Rasmussen that it was all a lies and tales, though Rasmussen remarks that the more powerful the Angakkoq is, the more they humble themselves by telling that they are nothing special, even the name *Sagdlork* is a literal word for lie. Rasmussen was then later apprehended by a fellow expeditionary of Greenlandic origin, though the man was a baptized Christian he knew the norms surrounding the ritual (Rasmussen 1945: 19). It was remarked that the Angakkoq Sagdlork was a highly respected member of the settlement community, as he was a from a feared family that could conjure spirits that were dangerous, and he himself could crawl out of his own skin and put it on again while onlookers would die if observed it (Rasmussen 1945: 19). During the ritual of spirit calling, as the drums got faster in rhythm, the whole of the settlement could hear the wrestling of the invisible spirits and the old Angakkoq cried in submission. Sagdlork's apprentice was on the roof of the dwelling shouting to his master that he should extend his powers while tears came down his face. After some time Sagdlork

shouted that the expedition members, that came to visit, had with them an evil spirit that had struck Harald Moltke as he came to the settlement sick, and that the sickness had now been transferred to the settlement's dogs, and if they were eaten the spirit would be digested (Rasmussen 1945: 20ff). Sagdlork's wife had been contaminated through ingesting dog meat and became sick herself and would die from it later in the summer. The wife received a surface burial, where Sagdlork's no longer communicated with fellow settlement inhabitants and would not leave his tent, his mourning furthermore consisted of starving himself. He later told Rasmussen as he was a stranger, that the wife had taken care of his clothes, readied the food, and that he could not live without her and would follow her to death (Rasmussen 1945: 23). The first contact with Europeans and indigenous peoples has long been associated with the spread of diseases, as separation between populations meant that diseases rarely transferred between one and other, and the meeting between them could further increase the biological risk of contamination. The Europeans has gradually developed immunity against certain types of diseases and could, without their knowledge, carry them to the indigenous populations where the sudden introduction could have fatal consequences, where spiritual leaders such as Sagdlork, who was considered powerful amongst his community, was not able to help his sick wife. This type of situation has been seen several times as Coates says, "Shamans or spiritual leaders, once believed to be all-powerful, had their weaknesses exposed as they failed to solve the dilemmas posed by the new illnesses" (Coates 2004: 129). The spread of diseases also had an impact in another part of Greenland, right after the Christianisation of the Inuit living around modern day Nuuk, where the small-pox epidemic struck the population in 1733-34, the small-pox would continue to devastate the populace of Greenland in the first couple of centuries, in the increasing colonisation and Christianisation of the island's natives (Gulløv et al. 2017: 75-78).

Observations of Gustav Holm

The living relatives and friends of the deceased had an important role regarding customs of rituals and practice for the treatment of the dead, this reflected their way of life in the harsh environment of the surrounding arctic landscape. One that would gather ethnographical records of pre-Christian Inuit was Gustav Holm, he was a Danish navy officer and led several expeditions in Greenland (Ventegodt 2020). During Gustav Holm's expedition in the east part of Greenland during the spring of 1885, he observed the pre-Christian customs in various forms regarding mourning of the deceased by the *Angmagsalik* Inuit. After a deceased had

passed onto death, only one or two of the closest relatives would touch and dress the body of the dead, as touching a deceased person would render the living a series of norms and taboos that they should uphold in their everyday life for a time. Holm described that people of the Angmagsalik fjord would not help people during and after an accident, due to fear of touching the victim of an accident. As he once perceived the victim of an accident with a man named *Suiarkak*, who disembarked his kayak by the foot of an icesheet, and unfortunately sank into the depth of the ocean, the father and family members could only watch Suiarkak sink without helping (Holm 1972: 116). The handling of a situation regarding the coming of death had been observed in the Himalaya's, where Crass described

> Even today, the Nepalese Sherpa guides in the Himalaya, when finding someone severely hypothermic and/or severely frostbitten, refuse to bring him/her down the mountain to medical care. The unfortunate individual is seen as dead, even if they still may be breathing hours later. To try and rescue someone this incapacitated would endanger the entire group (Crass 1998: 90).

During the situation regarding Suiarkak's accident, the family members nearby could have safeguarded their own lives, as helping the victim could further increase the risk of themselves getting pulled into the depths of the sea, even though Holm stated that he could be reached with the oar of the kayak. The observation by Holm put his own cultural practice of when one was conceived as dead, as people could be wrapped and buried in various situations, even though they would be considered by modern medicine still alive, where the people abandoned and buried could still be shouting to keep the dogs away (Crass 1998: 89).

The living relatives of the deceased would clean their dwelling of the deceased belongings, which included the skin of the hunt that would be in the dead one's bed and wall of the dwelling, as well as clothing which they would place on the ground outside for three days' time. The mourners would also throw away their old clothes which was associated with the dead, and would make new clothing as fast as possible when they did not have new ones available (Holm 1972: 116). The general clothing of Inuit had relatively stayed the same for centuries, where the specialized attire for a life in the arctic had a tremendous importance to the survival and lifestyle for the Inuit peoples, where even after the colonization, the garments the Europeans offered would be to no avail, as they did little to offer protection from the cold and necessities for their lifestyle. As an example, when a person is out on the hunt, some would remain stationary in the cold for some time until a game animal would show. Sudden

movements that required a lot of energy from the body creating heat. The garments would be made as not to let a person sweat, the innovation for a life in the arctic created specialized attire that made it possible for several expeditions to take place, as members of expeditions had to abandon their original outfits and change to what the locals used in the area (Hart Hansen et al. 1985: 135f). When Holm observed that living relatives of the deceased threw away their old garments for when a person dies, they are likely giving away their tool for survival, as clothing was a severely important tool for a life of an Inuit person. The mummified individuals of Qilakitsoq's grave gifts included several clothing's, made of various kinds of animals, where their fur and skin were suited to an individual through extensive work, as even the sewing thread could be made from the sinews of caribou, white fish, narwhal and seal (Hart Hansen et al. 1985: 144). The ritual of throwing out the deceased's and the living relatives old garments, can indicate the living are in a vulnerable state with the loss of a deceased. Discarding their old clothes can also signify the grand gesture towards the recently dead, as the extensive work of creating garments required substantial effort.

Holm would also describe that the dwelling members of the deceased would mourn the dead for three to five days, where they do not go out hunting for game or do anything, they would periodically cry loud and shout what qualities the deceased had during their lifetime. The family members of the dead could mourn for a month, as the rest of the dwelling members had done their duty to appease the dead ones spirit (tarneq) with their few days of mourning (Holm 1972: 116). The mourning period for the relatives and dwelling members of the deceased would be in a vulnerable state following the death of a person.

Cosmology

To understand the cosmological framework of Inuit, one must look towards the mythical stories to comprehend what kind of worldview the people of past Greenland had, as stories passed down orally might have had spiritual value that affected their daily lives. The pre-Christian society of Inuit had a rich and complex understanding of the cosmological frameworks, where oral histories were used to gain understanding of the natural world around them. This section will explore some of the many myths that have been gathered around Greenland as they might give further insight into the way the pre-Christian Inuit viewed the world around them.

Origin of day, death and the first burial

According to a myth from the Inuit of the high arctic of Greenland, there was a time where people lived in the darkness, there was no light, only in the lamps where water burned. It was during this time that the population of earth was full, as the people that lived knew no death. As the earth became overcrowded, there was a flood that drowned a great many. After the great flood, two old women discussed a dilemma to each other, where one said, “Better to be without day, if we are without death”, and the other expressed her desire “No let us have light and death”, after which the second old woman’s desire was granted. From then on, the people could die, and with death, the sun, the moon, and the stars came to be. As when one die, one becomes part of the sky and becomes celestial forms (Crass 1998: 614; Rasmussen 1979; vol 3: 48).

The origin of how daylight came to be, was an oral history that has been passed down from generation to generation. This myth offers a profound insight into how the Inuit of the high arctic perceived the world around them, where death played an integral part of their cosmological framework, as without death, the people would still live in darkness. The era of darkness before light emanated is described as having a different natural order as we understand in the present day, in this primordial world where separated elements such as water and fire seemed to be conjoined to produce the only light source that was known then. The supernatural element of this myth further extends to the concept of immortality, where the individuals continued to live and exist even after drowning. There was a transition to the natural order as we know it in the current age, where fire and water no longer could be unified. The shift in natural order came with the cost of immortality and produced a worldview that could be observed in length during the day, where the emergence of light emitted through the celestial bodies that inherited the sky during both night and day, it represents a transition from the primordial world and entered an era of the mortal world.

The significance of this oral history creates a relationship between the living and the deceased people of the past. The myth implies that the existence and actions from former generations directly influenced the world order and its circadian rhythms as we know it, the role of their ancestors and their sacrifices shaped a pivotal understanding of the environment and cosmological framework of the high arctic Inuit’s life. According to the myth many of the people of the past drowned in the great flood, which likely was the ocean. In the era before the 15th century, before the introduction of surface burials, the prominent burial method

was the sea burial as forementioned. It can be theorized that they gave the body of the deceased to the many drowned from the primordial era.

Another myth collected by the high arctic Inuit was about the first burial. After day and death came to be, a man was the first to die, after which he was buried under stones. The dead man thought he was still alive and rose up from the grave, only to be pushed back down by an old woman, who said that they had enough to carry without carrying him too. After which the deceased settled back into his grave and accepted that he was dead, and the living would go to hunt for animals as day gave the light to do so (Crass 1998:616) The timeline of the myth appears to be right after the creation of daylight, where the concept of dying was new in their consciousness, where mortality became a fate for every individual. This myth passed down as oral history serves an important function, as it provides an explanation regarding how to bury the body of a deceased, the practice of burial under stones, which can be seen around the coast of Greenland, was a common mortuary practice in their lifetime. Furthermore, the myth of the first burial underscores the finality of death and the importance of accepting it, both for the deceased and the living. The role of the old woman who pushes the dead man back, highlights the necessity for the living to focus on surviving, emphasising the pragmatic approach of their lifestyle.

Souls and continuity

Death became a part of life, but being deceased did not mean that one's soul no longer existed, as with the myth when light came to be, some parts of the deceased transferred to the sky becoming celestial bodies, and some parts was carried over to the different realms of reality that the Inuit held in their consciousness. The Inuit of pre-Christian world had a perception that life had a continuity, it was the continuation of the spirit, where one's body was but a vessel that withheld the different souls that made one person an Inuk.

An individual consisted of three grand souls and a body; the one soul is the personal soul called *tarneq*, tarneq is the lifeforce's core that is inside a human. It undergoes the development a human faces during their lifetime and creates an identity for the individual, from birth to death. It was also the force of power that made it possible for humans to repopulate, every individual has their own tarneq, and follows the individual as a shadow. When one dies, ones tarneq leaves the bodily vessel, where it must undergo a trial before coming into the realms of death. (Hart Hansen et al. 1985: 64-68). Tarneq in the modern

Greenlandic language has a proximity to darkness, as darkness is called *taarneq*, adding one *a* to the word separates darkness and soul.

The second soul is called anersaaq. Anersaaq is the breathing soul, where in the modern Greenlandic language *anersaartorpunga* means "I am breathing", while *anersaaq illernartoq* also refer to the holy spirit in Christianity. When one dies in the pre-Christian society of Inuit, the breath soul remained in the living realm, where they could haunt the living. The haunting spirits are called *anersaapiluit*, that could pursue the living and whisper evil things to a person. Anersaaq could be a reflection of the previous owner or a memory of the deceased (Hart Hansen et al. 1992: 61). The last soul that a body inherits is *ateq*, ateq is the name soul that also remained in the living realm. A newborn child could be named after a deceased person, so that the name soul of the deceased was passed on to the child, as Crass remarks "Names are part of one of the souls the Inuit possess and are seen as holding part of a person's essence, or *inua*. When a newborn is given the name of a recently deceased relative or community member, the child is thought to acquire some of the wisdom, skills and characteristics of the deceased" (Crass 1998: 145). However, one was not allowed to name anyone after the deceased until a year had passed, which could be because the deceased's tarneq was still in the process of getting through a trial that could take up to a year (Hart Hansen et al. 1985: 63f).

Humans were not the only ones to have souls, there were various kinds of souls that prevailed in the living realm. Animals were also thought to inhabit souls within them, as people hunted these animals to nurture themselves with their bodily flesh. The respects towards the animals was vital to their lifestyle, as their souls had a significant outcome to the livelihood of the people that hunted them. A ritual must be done before one goes out to hunt for subsistence, and a ritual after the animal has been brought to their demise, an example could be a seal that was hunted and brought back to the settlement, and the seal would have water poured into its mouth as a thanks and respect for it nourishing the people that ate it. This ritual could mean that the soul of the seal would return into the ocean and be reborn to be hunted again. Failing this ritual could have consequences to the people that hunted the seal, as when disregarding the ritual could mean that the soul would not come back to the sea and later be hunted, which would result in famine towards the people (Engelbrechtsen & Thomsen 2013: 53f). The continuity of life as spirits had a tremendous importance to the worldview of the pre-Christian Inuit, as the continuity played a part in all their lives, not only on the human aspect, but to the life around them in the harsh arctic landscape that encapsulates them.

According to a tale collected by Knud Rasmussen in east Greenland, it was not every soul that was content with being in one of the death realms. A great hunter named *Navagiaq* had succumbed to a fatal sickness, his personal soul, *tarneq*, traversed to a death realm, where his soul was not satisfied with the life he had on the living world, and therefore he wished to be alive again, after which his soul came back to the living. Navagiaq's soul did not come back to inhabit a human body, where instead his soul attached itself to different animals, hopping between their bodies, where he could embody being an animal with the result of forgetting his human essence. Each time Navagiaq's soul entered a new animal the former creature he inhabited would die, as the core of life was tarneq as forementioned. In the end Navagiaq was caught as a seal, as he died in his seal form, he wished revenge to the people killing his bodily vessel, his soul then inhabited a woman's stomach, where the woman became pregnant with Navagiaq's *tarneq,* in birth he refused to leave the womb as a revenge for killing him. Inside the womb he saw a small man with a crooked mouth where he became terribly frightened and left the womb. Now as a child, it was only Navagiaq who knew his name, and tried to tell the other people around him, only to be gibberish, until a day came where his first words were Navagiaq, and the people began to call him by that name, and as the name soul now inherited Navagiaq again, he would become the great hunter anew (Rasmussen 1979; vol 1: 118-122).

It was also gathered that the east Greenlandic Inuit had a perception regarding what makes one human, a multiple of souls is what constituted a human, these souls were small in stature and each limb had one, and the small souls gathered life force and emitted it through the mouth, therefore when one dies, the respiratory system no longer functions. The small souls contained in the limbs could also be stolen, and as a result the owner of the soul could get sick (Knud Rasmussen 1979; vol 1: 12).

The continuity of life through the soul was truly an important aspect of the Inuit culture, it shaped a part of their perception of cosmological framework with tales with the likes of Navagiaq, and the different souls that constituted what makes one human, it also creates individuality in their communities, as even the names were regarded as spiritual, as Nuttall remarks "the person is seen as both a material and non-material being. Non-material aspects, such as the name, give the person a unique identity as well as locating him/her in a complex web of social relationships that encompass both the living and dead" (Nuttall 1992: 60).

Journey to the afterlife

The personal soul, *tarneq*, leaves the body after death, as the high arctic Inuk *Majaq* said "The soul is what makes you beautiful, what makes you human. It alone makes your will, to act, to be passionate. It is what drives your entire life; and that is why the body must collapse when the soul leaves it" (Hart Hansen et al. 1985: 64). All living people will undergo the transition to death, but before the transition, the personal soul is in a liminal phase between the realms. The liminal phase consisted of a trial, before a soul could enter a death realm, they had to undergo a ritual after they have departed the living realm, a tightened extended skin where the souls crawled under it. It could take a year for an individual's soul to pass the tightened skin, the skin's function was to press the bodily fluids out from the soul (Grummesgaard-Nielsen 1997: 200). It depended on how the individual was in their time in the earthly realm, it might have been easy for some, such as the stillborn who not had yet made any decisions in their lives, such as breaking the norms and committed taboos. For the elderly's tarneq, who had lived longer could have more bodily fluids and would take longer to crawl under the tight skin. The fluid had the function of, the more one individual had, the longer it would take for them to reach one of the death realms, the living had a rule as not to cry with tears, as tears would have been bound to the deceased's soul and would take longer to crawl under the skin (Hart Hansen 1985: 68f).

The realms of death

The cosmological framework regarding where the individual's soul would end up in, is deeply connected to the natural world and the environment in which the people lived in. The belief surrounding the journey of the soul reflects a profound relationship with the landscape as the realms of death can be depicted as having similar settings to what they had while they lived. After an individual's soul had undergone the ritual of the extended tightened skin, the possible realms one could enter was in the vicinity of what they could perceive while they lived. The realm underneath the surface of the ocean, in the depths of the sea. In the underwater nether realm of the dead, the souls that chose this realm could nourish themselves from the fauna one could find in the ocean, and there was a plethora of game animals than there was in the living world. It was believed that those who died at sea would travel to the underwater realm of death (Rasmussen 1979; vol 1: 14). The other realm one's soul could traverse to was in the sky, the souls that ended there could nourish themselves with the land fauna and flora, such as caribou and berries that can be found in the land (Grummesgaard-Nielsen 1997: 201; Gulløv

et al. 2005: 322f). The criteria to where the souls could end up in depended on where the bodily vessel was buried, if one chose to go to the sky realm, they would be buried in land, and to reach the underwater realm they were laid to rest in the ocean. There was a way the soul could reach both death realms, if the body of the deceased was placed near the high tide line of the sea in the land, and remain there for three days, they could enter both realms. There was a limit, if one died at sea and the living pulled the body to land, the deceased's soul could only reach the underwater realm (Rasmussen 1979; vol 1: 14). The living relatives of the deceased had a significant role regarding to where their dead was bound to end up in, as the location they were buried had a great importance to the afterlife of the deceased.

Meeting of different worldviews

An important collector of Greenlandic oral histories was a man named *Aron from Kangeq* (1822-1869), he was originally a hunter, but due to tuberculosis he was unable to resume his vocation as a huntsman. He was later encouraged by *H. J. Rink* (1819-1893) to write down and illustrate Greenlandic myths and legends, as such, many of the oral histories were put down in the written language (Kühn-Nielsen 2020).

One of the oral histories Aron from Kangeq collected was a meeting between the Christian and pre-Christian Inuit, that took place in the south of Greenland. The pre-Christian Inuit had come from the east to trade with the Christian people of the south. It was observed by the people of the south, that the people of the east came to their settlement were extensively clean, even cleaning after the southerners had touched their equipment. This was due to fear of getting sick and this behaviour coincides with Rasmussen's meeting the northerners, where they had an understanding that coming into contact with outsiders of their community could bring evil spirits, which we now know were diseases. Even though the Inuits from the east took precautions, in Aron's story, some of them got contaminated and got sick, amongst them were *Ivanniisaaq* and his family. The east Greenlandic family wanted to be treated by an angakkoq, as it was the custom of the pre-Christian society, where his sister searched for one, but the southerners took this approach as paganism, and thought this tradition belonged in the past. Ivanniisaaq later died of the disease, the Christian people suggested that he should be buried under the ground, to which the sister of Ivanniisaaq replied that his soul would freeze and suffer if left under the ground. The easterners gave Ivanniisaaq a sea burial, where the body sank but later resurfaced and the easterners regarded this as though he was missing something. The cause was that he was missing a grave gift, which was

his knife that he always had with him, they gave the body his knife, and the deceased began to sink in the sea (Thisted 1999: 338f).

Figure 3: When Ivanniisaaq died, his housemates buried him at sea. (Thisted 1999: 339).

This story reflects the same traditions that were described earlier, where giving the deceased the right tools was a necessity, and it underlines the importance of grave gifts because without the item Ivanniisaaq would not pass onto the afterlife. The story also tells of the important role the angakkoq had in the pre-Christian society, as in this story of curing the sick, as Ivanniisaaq sister asks for the presence of an angakkoq, and as there was none present, he could not get well and died as consequence. It also underlines the importance of a proper burial when his sister states that if he were buried under ground he would freeze and suffer, therefore he received the proper burial he wished for and continued to the afterlife.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to gain insight into the perception of life and death in the pre-Christian Inuit society of Greenland, with the use of empirical data from different centuries in the various branches of the humanities. With the use of archaeological data, it could be determined that the pre-Christian society had various forms of mortuary practices, where the predominant method of burial before the 15th century was sea burials, after this period the methods of burying individuals became significantly more diverse. The ethnographical records of the expeditions of Knud Rasmussen and Gustav Holm has helped gain insight into the Inuit of the north and east of Greenland, as their portrayals regarding their life has helped put into context the various rituals, norms and taboos one should uphold. As when Rasmussen observed the angakkoq Sagdlork, where he tried to commune with the spirits to heal his sick wife, the whole vicinity of the angakkoq froze in their place to listen to his ritual.

The norms and taboos observed by Holm were instrumental to determine the importance of mourning the deceased, as the dead were regarded to still being able to feel, as illustrated by the story of Ivanniisaaq. This paper has also delved into the myths of how the pre-Christian Inuit perceived the world around them, where the past of the world was regarded as having no light and lived in darkness. The people of the past had sacrificed their immortality to gain the light that could be observed in the sky. The transition of the world from darkness to light created a new natural order as we know it in the present. The myth of the first burial underscores their way of life, and accepting death was a necessity that emphasised the pragmatic approach to their lifestyle. The body of an individual could die, but the pre-Christian society believed that they had multiple of souls, and the collection of these souls was what made one human. They believed that their personal soul would end up in one of the death realms and it was up to the preference of the individual where their soul was bound to end up, as the Inuit's lifeforce never ceased, death was only a transition to another form of existence.

This paper has only taken a fraction of the empirical data available and future studies should include more about the angakkoq and the important role they have as a spiritual guide in the pre-Christian Inuit society. They could also explore the spirits that linger in the living world more deeply, as these spirits had various roles, with some being considered deadly and having a significant influence on the living. Future studies ought to take a structured approach, where each district of Greenland should be analysed on their own, as they could have their own stories and beliefs regarding life and death.

With the use of various empirical data, this paper gained some insight into how the Inuit perceived death, even though there is no written history from before the introduction of the Christian belief. With the use of oral history there can be gained much information regarding their cosmological frameworks of the pre-Christian era, and how they perceived the life around them.

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Pictures

Figure 1: Abelsen, N. (2000). *Migsuarnianguaq gets Angiut as helper spirit.*

Figure 2: Engelbrechtsen, K. N. Jørgensen, M.R. (2016). *Silamut – Grønlands forhistorie*. Nuuk: Departementet for Uddannelse, Gymnasieafdelingen.

Figure 3: Thisted, K. (1999). *When Ivanniisaaq died, his housemates buried him at sea.* Taken from: Thisted, K. (1999). *'Saaledes skriver jeg, Aron'. Samlede fortællinger og illustrationer af Aron fra Kangeq* I-II. Nuuk: Atuakkiorfik