

## Who's afraid of Kaassassuk? Writing as a tool in coping with changing cosmology

## Qui a peur de Kaassassuk? L'écriture comme outil pour faire face à une cosmologie changeante

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### Article abstract

Education, literacy, and art were technologies used by Greenlanders in adapting to and coping with changes brought about by colonial impacts from Denmark. Stories orally transmitted through the ages were among the first texts to be written by Greenlanders. This article focuses on changes in symbolic meanings of the environmental setting in the pan-Inuit myth about the maltreated orphan Kaassassuk who became a strong man and took a terrible revenge. Beginning with the traditional pan-Inuit and Greenland variants, the analysis ends up with Hans Lyngé's play *Kågssagssuk*, staged in 1966. Traditionally, the symbolism of the natural forces underscored Kaassassuk's brutal character, but later it structured the literary composition of his story and changed him into a re-socialised individual. In Lyngé's play, the natural forces even gave way to contemporary moral and psychological considerations during the political upheaval leading to Greenland's Home Rule.

# Who's afraid of Kaassassuk? Writing as a tool in coping with changing cosmology

Birgitte Sonne\*

**Résumé:** Qui a peur de Kaassassuk? L'écriture comme outil pour faire face à une cosmologie changeante

L'éducation, la littérature et l'art furent les techniques utilisées par les Groenlandais pour s'adapter et faire face aux changements causés par l'impact de la colonisation danoise. Parmi les premiers textes écrits du Groenland figurent les récits oralement transmis à travers les âges. Cet article concerne les modifications du sens symbolique du mythe pan-inuit de Kaassassuk, l'orphelin maltraité qui se vengea de façon horrible une fois devenu un homme fort. Prenant son point de départ dans les variantes traditionnelles pan-inuit et groenlandaises, l'article se termine par l'analyse de *Kâgssagssuk*, pièce de Hans Lynge mise en scène en 1966. Traditionnellement, le symbolisme des forces de la nature souligne le caractère brutal de Kaassassuk, mais plus tard il structure la composition littéraire, métamorphosant le protagoniste qui devient un individu resocialisé. Dans la pièce de Lynge, les forces de la nature finissent par céder la place à des considérations morales et psychologiques, contemporaines du soulèvement politique qui a abouti au Home Rule du Groenland.

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Education, literacy, and art were technologies used by Greenlanders in adapting to and coping with changes brought about by colonial impacts from Denmark. Stories orally transmitted through the ages were among the first texts to be written by Greenlanders. This article focuses on changes in symbolic meanings of the environmental setting in the pan-Inuit myth about the maltreated orphan Kaassassuk who became a strong man and took a terrible revenge. Beginning with the traditional pan-Inuit and Greenland variants, the analysis ends up with Hans Lynge's play *Kâgssagssuk*, staged in 1966. Traditionally, the symbolism of the natural forces underscored Kaassassuk's brutal character, but later it structured the literary composition of his story and changed him into a re-socialised individual. In Lynge's play, the natural forces even gave way to contemporary moral and psychological considerations during the political upheaval leading to Greenland's Home Rule.

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## Introduction

Literacy is beyond doubt a creative tool. With the colonisation of oral cultures and, more recently, their insertion into a globalised world, literacy has frequently helped them cope with the impacts of modernity. Ong (1982) was an eye-opener on literacy, but his assertion—previously endorsed—that the effects of becoming literate are *automatic*, has been attacked. People do not learn passively or change automatically. Some customary ways of life usually remain in force, and the worldviews of the colonisers are accepted, understood from different cultural backgrounds (Street 1993), and thus “indigenised” (Sahlins 1999). For various goals people more or less consciously select traditions for reinterpretation. Customs thus become traditions, normative, and hence “[...] drawn from the cultural background into the cultural foreground” (Otto and Pedersen 2000). Besides, some traditions may be purely invented (Hobsbawm 1963), some revived, and others reversed, in opposition to the picture of their own native traditions offered by “impostors” (Kvaale 2007). Yet some of the cultural stamp remains, as Fienup-Riordan (1990: 231) concludes about new Yup’ik traditions, which “are simultaneously unprecedented and unmistakably Yup’ik.”

In Greenland, continuity and change have been mutually at work through the concerted effects of Christian missions, literacy, and continuous Danish ideological impacts since 1721 (e.g., Langgård 2008; Thisted 2002).<sup>1</sup> Except for typical Greenlandic subdued humour, it is nonetheless hard to pin down how the story about the orphan Kaassassuk, the subject of this article, remained unmistakably Greenlandic when drawn into the cultural foreground as a symbol of Greenlandic identity. The story used to be told from East Greenland to North Alaska, but only in Greenland has the key figure been raised to role model status. While still being told in Greenlandic, and still employed by artists and writers in Greenland alone (Larsen n.d.), the story has undergone colonial influences. These influences will be traced here by examining the history of mission and local variants of the story, by referring to Inuit cosmology, and by comparing different variants from across the Arctic.

## Historical context of Kaassassuk in Greenland

In Greenland, literacy was introduced by the Danish Lutheran mission on the West Coast in 1721. Reading and some writing skills were required for baptism and subsequent confirmation (for legal marriage), with the result that the majority of West Greenlanders were literate to various degrees by ca. 1800 (e.g., Frandsen 1999). Catechisms and hymns were translated and printed from an early date, the Gospels in 1746. Reading matter was scarce until the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. From 1861, a monthly periodical in Greenlandic was distributed along the west coast. This *Atuagagdliutit*

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<sup>1</sup> For English overviews of the decisive political, economic, religious, and intellectual changes, see Berthelsen (1986; 1988); Kleivan (1995); Langgård (1998; 2008); and Petersen (1985). For translated samples of Greenland literature, see Fortescue (1990).

# Technologies créatives: expérimentation et pratiques sociales dans les sociétés arctiques

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Rédactrice invitée:

Nancy Wachowich\*

## Introduction

Lorsque nous évoquons la vie des Inuit dans l'Arctique, nous pensons souvent à des gens qui s'adaptent à des conditions extrêmes en utilisant des technologies solides et durables — objets durs ou mous, objets inertes faits de pierre, d'os, de métal, de bois, de peau, de fourrure, de neige ou de glace. Nous pensons également aux outils, à l'équipement, aux instruments ou aux dispositifs qu'utilisent les Inuit pour procurer de la nourriture et un abri à leurs familles. Mais les technologies doivent-elles toujours être relatives à des objets matériels, que l'on tient fermement dans la paume de main ou sous le pied? Autrefois, les peuples chasseurs nomades du nord voyageaient léger. Ils n'emportaient que quelques outils, le reste était fabriqué sur place. La technologie n'était pas forcément portée sur le dos d'une personne, étroitement ficelée sur un traîneau ou placée au fond d'un bateau; elle pouvait également être une pensée dans la tête de quelqu'un. La technologie ne se composait pas que d'objets, mais aussi de la connaissance et des savoir-faire nécessaires pour fabriquer ces outils, qui pouvaient être rejetés ou irrémédiablement perdus, avant d'être re-fabriqués, encore et encore, en improvisant avec les matériaux que l'on trouvait à portée de la main.

Avec les épisodes de contacts culturels, les technologies de chasse en sont venues à inclure les matériaux, outils, savoir-faire, systèmes de connaissances et relations sociales que l'on reconnaît généralement pour faire partie — voire pour être le lot — de la société industrielle occidentale. Savoir manier les fusils, les radios, les véhicules tout-terrain et les motoneiges est devenu aujourd'hui aussi nécessaire à la subsistance et à la survie des Inuit que l'était autrefois le fait d'apprendre à utiliser un harpon ou conduire un équipage de chiens de traîneau. Mais comment pourrions-nous qualifier ces instruments et pratiques sociales emblématiques des modes de vie sédentaires (plutôt que nomades), ou celles qui se concentrent sur le bien-être de la communauté, ou celles qui permettent la communication et l'interaction, au niveau local et à un niveau plus global? Comment envisager ces pratiques qui combinent les médias imprimés traditionnels et les nouveaux réseaux sociaux électroniques? De telles réévaluations et reconfigurations de nos idées reçues au sujet de la technologie devraient-elles inclure les pratiques créatives, relationnelles, idéologiques et souvent

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(‘reading matter for free’), today a modern, bilingual newspaper, broadened the influences of European culture to non-religious matters. It used to publish travelogues, Western novels, news from the world, and a wealth of illustrations showing buildings, cities, woods, parks, scenes of farming, war, foreign carnivorous animals, and foreign-looking people. More limited in distribution, four booklets of Greenland stories appeared in Greenlandic from 1859 to 1863 (Rink 1859-1863) and presented a selection from a vast collection taken down mainly by educated Greenlanders from oral tradition. About 500 stories were forwarded to the Inspector of South Greenland, H.J. Rink, in response to his 1858 circular urging one and all to write down their oral stories.

Some texts of the Rink collection (Rink NKS 2488, I-VI) are barely readable, others are more or less close to the oral way of storytelling, and some meet high standards of literacy.<sup>2</sup> Among the latter are the stories taken down by Aron (1822-1869), from the Moravian mission (established 1736) in Nuuk. Besides being the first Greenland illustrator of stories, he was extraordinarily skilled in both writing and adapting the stories to changing ideals.<sup>3</sup> He developed the character of Kaassassuk from a mass-murdering type into an individual recognising his limitations—a new role model for Christian Greenlanders (Thisted 1993). His variant of Kaassassuk was among a total of nine received by Rink who selected it for the first publication in Greenlandic (Rink 1859-63, II; doc. 93)<sup>4</sup> and thus set the further development of this figure.

Two generations later, its popularity increased with the more widespread version of Aron’s variant by Jaakuaraq Eugenius (1863-1928) (Sonne 2005: doc. 1395)<sup>5</sup> when translated into Danish and published by Knud Rasmussen in 1924 (Rasmussen 1921-25, II: 34-52)<sup>6</sup> and later in Greenlandic by Kristoffer Lynge in 1938 (K. Lynge 1978: 21-38; Thisted 1993). Jaakuaraq wrote his version about the same time as the 1914 publication of the first Greenland novel *Singnagtugaq* (‘The Dream’) by Mathias Storch. This novel has been commonly proclaimed the birth of Greenland’s literature, which subsequently followed, broadly speaking, literary developments in Denmark (e.g., Langgård 2008). Storch and his contemporaries did not favour the then vilified pre-Christian tradition.

At a more comfortable distance from the pagan past, Hans Lynge (1906-1988), a Greenlandic “cultural pioneer” (Kaalund et al. 2006), drew deliberately on tradition, not for a literary revival but for inspiration. Looking for continuity with the past, he strove to come to grips with his own time by recovering “the Greenland soul” (Lynge 2006: 121ff). Educated as a catechist, but dismissed due to tuberculosis at an early age

<sup>2</sup> See Thisted (1999) for a thorough study of the Rink collection.

<sup>3</sup> Richly demonstrated by Thisted (1993).

<sup>4</sup> Van Londen (1999: 113-116) quotes the English version from Rink (1875: 93-99), which mainly follows Aron’s.

<sup>5</sup> Trilingual edition, see Rasmussen (1967).

<sup>6</sup> From 1925 an increasing number of educated Greenlanders learned to read and speak Danish.

and living on a miserable pension, Lyngé had to work hard. Remaining a true Christian, he nevertheless mocked the narrow-mindedness of the clerical leadership and other Greenland authorities. His courage in taking up both individual emotions and erotic issues was felt especially liberating by his junior followers (Motzfeldt 2006). As a playwright his motto was both to inspire and to amuse (Kleivan 1996). Albeit serious, his play *Kâgssagssuk* (Lyngé 1966; 1967) has a current of subdued humour that runs in continuity with tradition.

## Methods

The expansions of the Thule culture from North Alaska to Greenland after 1000 AD created a common “semantic field” that enables us to compare different variants, using the hypothesis that inside this culture area “the data become mutually interpretative” (Oosten 2006: 61). Such comparison may also shed light on symbolic meanings, my main concern in analysing Kaassassuk. For the history of the variants told by Aron and other proselytes of the Moravian mission, one has to look to East Greenland, as it is from there that the ancestors of most Moravian Greenlanders emigrated (e.g., Sonne 2001). Since the mission arrived at a much later date in East Greenland (1894), some of the peculiarities in Aron’s version may reflect an East Greenland setting. Comparisons within Greenland are facilitated by a representative database of about 2,280 Greenland stories in either summary or translation with bibliographical data (Sonne 2005) and by Kirsten Thisted’s published transcriptions and translations (Thisted 1999, Thorning et al. 1999). Lyngé’s play must be analysed in relation to the moral and political context of the 1960s.

I have selected variants of Kaassassuk that are close to the Greenland type in terms of having similar episodes and/or the same salient elements, whether or not the orphan’s name is a phonological equivalent of Kaassassuk.<sup>7</sup> My focus will be on the variants by Aron and Jaakuaraq, both from South Greenland, which together with other variants from there have the following elements in common: the name of the power-bestowing Pissaap Inua (‘Master of Force’) and Kaassassuk’s marriage with the daughter of Qaassuk, another strong figure of oral tradition. With a few East Greenland variants (Sonne 2005: doc. 315, 434), they further share the motif of Kaassassuk secretly demonstrating his strength by carrying a huge trunk of driftwood from the shore and then raising it in a threatening position at the common longhouse or blocking the longhouse entrance tunnel.

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<sup>7</sup> See Boas (1964: 222-225; 1901-07: 186-188), Métayer (1973: 116-123), Rasmussen (1929: 88-91; 1930: 52-55; 112-113), Sonne (2005: doc. 93, 134, 195, 269, 278, 285, 315, 352, 434, 600, 660, 661, 1013, 1060, 1395, 1552, 1837), and Turner (1894: 265f). Left out are Boas (1964: 220-222), Rasmussen (1930b: 121-123, 1932: 193-198, 1952: 188ff) and Sonne (2005: doc. 1734).

### The Kaassassuk story and the changes by Aron

Kaassassuk, an abused orphan, starved and smeared with shit, is given physical strength and growth by some *inua* ('spirit') from the Other World way up in the inland country. Enabled at last to kick or throw around boulders, Kaassassuk demonstrates his strength. First, in secret at night, he moves some big thing that makes everybody wonder in the morning, and then, in public during daylight, he kills three bears single-handedly, a mother with two cubs. Frightened people curry favour with Kaassassuk, but in vain. He takes a terrible revenge, embracing and thereby squeezing children and adults to death. Only his old adoptive mother and another helpful relative are spared. The South Greenland variants have him then go by kayak to Qaassuk, whose son he defeats in a trial of strength and whose daughter he "marries" in the presence of both Qaassuk and his son, who are tied and bound to a supporting pillar. In most variants he continues killing at random and thus reminds the listeners of the risk, through maltreatment, of giving up orphans to the powers of the Other World.

Aron brings the series of murders to an end and stops further evil consequences by adding an episode of a single combat sought by Kaassassuk. The opponent is the similarly extremely strong *Ususaarmiarsunnguaq*. Kaassassuk ends up defeated, but at the moment he is to be hurled into the sea his opponent's father steps in with the old saying "It seems that lone persons may, when killed, turn out to have relatives (for taking revenge)" (Sonne 2005: doc. 93). This changed ending improves on the traditional variants that either let the brute remain a mass murderer or have him killed, tortured or, in East Greenland, lose a duel over dogs (Sonne 2005: doc. 134, 195, 278, 285, 315 (E.Grl.), 434 (E.Grl.)).

A few South Greenland variants offer special solutions, i.e., having Kaassassuk killed by a *tupilak* (sorcery figure) made from his own shit (Sonne 2005: doc. 269, 352). Another one ends with Kaassassuk leading a happy life with his wife and adoptive mother after the massacre, meaning that nobody dares to continue the feud (Sonne 1982). A third version, strongly influenced by Christianity, merely evades the problem by declaring that Kaassassuk abstained from taking any revenge whatsoever (Sonne 2005: doc. 1837). The Polar Inuit either have Kaassassuk develop into an invincible mass murderer (*ibid.*: doc. 1060), have him consequently killed (*ibid.*: doc. 1552), or present him with only one tormentor, on whom he takes revenge, thus ending the story in an act of just retaliation (Sonne 1982, 2005: doc. 660, 661). In the Canadian Inuit variants, he generally ends up an incurable wife beater. Most East Greenland variants have Kaassassuk and/or his son defeated by a stronger person or a mass murderer, but the defeat does not cause the self-reflection that turns Kaassassuk into a role model on the West Coast (Thisted 1993).

In a variant from Moravian Labrador, re-socialisation occurs by the simple act of Kaassassuk getting married (Turner 1894: 265f). In Northwest Alaska, it occurs by order of the empowering *inua*, the 'spirit' of the air, who had asked for blood offerings for the hero's murders in return, but eventually got fed up. Neither variant shows signs of self-reflection (Rasmussen 1952: 188ff). In line with Alaskan Poor Boy stories (van

Londen 1999), the North Alaskan boy develops into a great and respected hunter by means of a magic rod, the former murder weapon he received from the *inua* of the air.

### The ambiguous powers

In most variants,<sup>8</sup> recurring elements reveal why the powers bestowed on Kaassassuk both justified his revenge and placed him outside social control. Besides the power bestowed by the *inua*, there are Kaassassuk's peculiar nostrils,<sup>9</sup> the only growing part of his body, and his kicking or throwing around of big stones, which proves and/or increases his physical strength.<sup>10</sup> Since, as shown below, all of these elements allude to *pinnga*, the inland country and heaven "up there behind you," I call the ambiguous powers the *pinnga* forces.

### Breath

Kaassassuk's nostrils grow due to maltreatment. Whenever the dwarfish boy wants to join people in the common room, he is lifted up from the entrance tunnel by somebody hooking two fingers into them. A heavy breath (alluding to *sila*, 'air') is the outcome, as pictured once by the incessant waves his breathing raises in front of his kayak (Sonne 2005: doc. 1013). In Greenland myths, heavy breathing characterises the biggest giants of the inland ice, whose frozen exhalations form bridges of fog for travelling between the mountaintops. Spatially, they are structurally opposed to the noseless Innersuit beneath the foreshore, who do not breathe at all (Sonne 1996). In cosmography, the strengthened Kaassassuk is consequently placed far up behind human coastal dwellings, at the same level as the biggest giants living on the high inland country.<sup>11</sup> Here the power-bestowing figures also belong, be they Pissaap Inua—a giant land predator who hurls the boy somersaulting along with its huge tail—or a giant who sounds like thunder. This leads us to the heaven above the inland country from where, in Eastern Canadian Arctic variants, either the moon *inua* or a star *inua* operating in the light of the moon descends and lashes Kaassassuk with its whip (a mythic equivalence to the predator's tail). *Sila* (the Spirit of the Air) is the empowering figure in the Copper Inuit<sup>12</sup> and North Alaskan Inuit variants. In Inuit orientation, centred on the coast and facing out to sea, a being belonging to and above the inland country is called *pinnga*, 'somebody up there behind your back' (Gagné 1968; Schultz-Lorentzen 1969: 40). *Pinnga* is the name of The Mistress of the Caribou among the Caribou Inuit (Rasmussen 1930a: 51ff), and also the word used to substitute for both the moon and the sun by people observing taboos in East Greenland (Rasmussen n.d.:

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<sup>8</sup> Including the Greenland variants not published in English.

<sup>9</sup> Lacking in Rasmussen (1929: 88-91) and Turner (1894: 265ff).

<sup>10</sup> Lacking in Boas (1901-07: 186-188).

<sup>11</sup> See Grønnow (2009) for "the blessings and horrors of the inland."

<sup>12</sup> Métayer (1973: 116-123) copies the South Greenland variants to a degree that points to Knud Rasmussen as the storyteller during the Fifth Thule Expedition.



booklet 405). From up there, big stones and boulders come rolling down, boulders like those kicked around by the strengthened Kaassassuk.

### *Stones from up there behind*

Mountains dominate Greenland's landscape. They were thought to make up the world's long-lasting skeleton that, nevertheless, undergoes changes. Through such movement (evidence of life), stones are seen to come down from above. In spring a boulder may come tumbling down, roaring in a shower of sparks, and smelling of smoke (Sonne 2005: doc. 485), while smaller ones come sliding down with rain and the melting snow in spring. Slowly weather and tidal waters erode bigger stones into smaller ones. Crumbling stones are said to be "rotten." Frost glues stones firmly to the ground, yet some are pulled loose in some variants by Kaassassuk, like his handling of a big trunk of driftwood. In ancient Inuit practice, stones were used as components of many different structures or objects: houses, caches, graves, cairns, weirs, weapons, utensils, etc. Boys developed their strength and marksmanship by lifting ever bigger stones and throwing small ones at targets and small birds. In ritual practice, stones mediated connections with the Other World, such as when a shaman pupil's called forth spirits by rubbing a small stone in circles on the flat side of a rock or on a gravestone, or by skipping small stones on the surface of a lake (e.g., *ibid.*: doc. 2283, 1241). Among the South Baffin Inuit, when a shaman encountered a stone rolling downhill during a spring melt, he received it with pleasure as his new and strong helping spirit (Boas 1964: 183).

Certainly, stones have differing meanings in the Inuit world. In Inuit myths, giants of the distant inland country (including Pissaap Inua) would roll huge stones downhill (Sonne 2005: doc. 248, 434) and use them for fertiliser. The giant "Little Moon," like the moon itself but by less violent means, called forth menstruation (alias fertility) by heaping up big stones on his human wife's body (e.g., *ibid.*: doc. 159). Another giant stopped doing so to facilitate delivery when told that this was not the way of humans (*ibid.*: doc. 92, 826). Again in mythic equivalence with the moon (*ibid.*: doc. 1343, 1344, 1353, 1675), a big boulder, *Aqajarormiorsiorpua* ('striving to get into the stomach' [of a house]), came rolling down in spring, threatened to ruin the house, and had to be stopped by a shaman (*ibid.*: doc. 208, 1192). A barren woman would try to remedy her infertility by placing a small white stone in her briefs, believing it had come down from heaven (Thalbitzer 1923: 274). When a Nattilik shaman went to heaven, a party of deceased humans did nothing but play with such light-coloured pebbles. He got hold of one to carry home (Rasmussen 1931: 392). On earth, as constituents of a boulder, similar stones are called *uvivigtut* ('naughty, thievish, lecherous ones') (*ibid.*: 388), who steal their way into houses (Robert Petersen pers. comm.), just like *Aqajarormiorsiorpua* in miniature. Another Nattilik, a woman who turned into a sacrificial stone because she rejected all of her suitors, ended up completely covered up by the light-coloured stones she received for making the hunts a success (Rasmussen 1931: 386f). *Aqajarormiorsiorpua* used to be a sacrificial stone as well, as were several along Greenland's west coast (Lynge 1981: 82) such as the boulder called *Naartup*

*pissiffia* ('Big Naar's sacrificial place') near Nuuk (Lynge 1978: 43f). *Naar* ('belly') points to the Canadian Inuit Naarssuk or Silap Inua, and also to the *naar*-times of dawn and dusk in the spirit languages (Rasmussen 1930b: 77; 1931: 310; 1932: 112; Rosing 1957-61, I: 92). Stones are therefore polysemous and ambivalent, associated as they obviously are with successful hunting, annual renewal of life in spring, disaster, adultery, and fertility.

Several Greenland variants associate Kaassassuk with other stones, in addition to the boulders he kicks around. He is said to have used big stones to build a huge trap for catching polar bears or a large house. He sometimes smashes boulders to pieces, and may even kick his way into mountains, using both his feet and his head (Sonne 2005: doc. 152). Aron's variant, however, adds further meanings. Firstly, Kaassassuk is likened to a stone by the families who take turns adopting the orphaned boy. "Let's take him. Since he is not a stone he shall sooner or later start to grow" (*ibid.*: doc. 93). Yet disappointed, one family after another throws him out until eventually an old marginalised woman adopts him for good. At that point, by hurling him along like a rolling stone, Pissaap Inua transforms the boy's stony nature and gives him the power to master stones,<sup>13</sup> i.e. to overcome the difficulties in his life.

Next, Aron has the boy hide a small piece of flint under his foreskin. He stealthily tries to use it for chewing because his tormentors knock out his teeth whenever any appear. His teeth grow but are removed, as is the piece of flint when found in its conspicuous hiding place, an allusion to the well-known Inuit association of sex with eating. With the physical powers he gains, Aron's Kaassassuk not only overturns every object he encounters on his way downhill from the inland country, but also budes a steep rock wall with a push of his shoulder. Finally Aron ends his narrative with stones. After losing the final duel, Kaassassuk squeezes a white stone into sand and a black stone into nothing more than an oblong form (Sonne 2005: doc. 93), both to demonstrate his defeat. As noted by Thisted (1993), here Aron clearly demonstrates Kaassassuk's self-reflective development and his final recognition of his limitations.

### *Air and pillar*

In Canadian Inuit mythology, the air (of a bubble) and a tall mountain were interchangeable supports of heaven. Killing Naarssuk, the *inua* of the air, would make the Nattilik space collapse or level all mountains with the same effect of heaven falling down in southeast Baffin Island (Rasmussen 1929: 71f; 1931: 230f; Boas 1901-07: 537). In Greenland, depending on whether the imagery was outdoors or indoors, the supports were imagined as being either a tall mountain or one or more pillars. Outdoors on starry nights, heaven was observed to circle from on top of a tall mountain in the north (Egede 1939: 43, 44; 1971[1741]: 57, 59). Indoors, the imagery was the interior of a house supported by pillars. A single pillar was most commonly referred to, be it a decaying one repaired by a shaman—in reaction to the preaching of Doomsday—

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<sup>13</sup> Or by making him grow in some East Greenland variants (Sonne 2005: doc. 315, 434).

(Egede 1939: 176, 1971[1741]: 80; Egede 1939: 27, 51, 1971[1741]: 32, 69) or one controlled by an *inua* of strong winds. This pillar was not in the world from its very beginning. It was raised up with the help of Erlaveersiniooq ('Entrails Snatcher'), alias Nalikkatteeq ('Big Crutch') (Sonne 2005: doc. 1596). In several variants of "A human's visit to the moon," she threatens to knock it down (*ibid.*: doc. 1596, 616, 159, 333, 283). The big trunk of driftwood raised by Kaassassuk and placed in an ominous sloping position behind the longhouse may be due to the storyteller's ancestry in driftwood-rich East Greenland, as also in variants of Nalikkatteeq's threat to let the world-supporting pillar fall. This demonstration of his powers is repeated when he has sex with Qaassuk's daughter right under the eyes of Qaassuk and his son, both of whom are tied to a pillar.

In a West Greenland variant, the threatening Erlaveersiniooq is explicitly said to be the person who controls the weather (*ibid.*: doc. 283). Similarly, in June 1738 the missionary Poul Egede (1971: 87; 1939: 62) was told that Silap Inua was identical to Erloersortoq (Erlaveersiniooq). The figures personifying the aspects of weather are called a multitude of names<sup>14</sup> besides Silap Inua: Naarssuk, the giant air baby in Canada; Nalikkatteeq; a giant of the inland ice, blowing icy winds in winter and farting warm ones in summer (N. Egede 1971: 65, 81f; 1939: 166, 176); the *inua* of the moon, who blows or vomits snow through a tube (e.g., Sonne 2005: doc. 440); Asiaq, the *inua* of precipitation in East Greenland, whose baby-husband produces pee (rain) and semen (snow). She can change his size by clapping his body, very much indeed, like Naarssuk, whose faculty Saladin d'Anglure (1993) likens to that of a penis. Naarssuk similarly sends snow in winter and rain in summer and, whenever his diaper gets loose, gales of farting. It is not explicitly stated where in space Naarssuk belongs. The Alaskan Silap Inua, also a baby of the air, belongs to the inland mountains, as do Asiaq and her baby-husband (Sonne 2005: doc. 1355). Both Kaassassuk and his adversary are in various ways likened to the baby of the air: Kaassassuk by his childish stature and manners, yet magnified by his eventual growing; Ususaarmiarsunnguaq implicitly so by the meaning of his name, 'the little penis with the capacity to grow big.'

Just as breath means life, gales bring death. In the case of Kaassassuk, he cannot master an inland gale when out at sea. He is still a beginner in kayaking and, like the biggest giants of the inland country, who cannot learn this art of humans and coastal spirits (Sonne 1996), Kaassassuk loses his balance, tips over, and is sent sideways adrift to Qaassuk's home. Only Aron and (to a lesser degree) Jaakuaraq include this episode that shows Kaassassuk overpowered out at sea by his own *pinnga* forces, a foreboding of his eventual defeat. The further meanings of *sila*, i.e., sense and intelligence, scarcely apply to the traditional Kaassassuk, who is empowered with *pinnga* forces. He remains witless and beyond the reach of learning, like Naarssuk the giant baby of the air.

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<sup>14</sup> Treated with ingenuity at length as the "avatars of Sila" by Saladin d'Anglure (1986; 1990).

## The defeat of Kaassassuk

In Aron's version, Kaassassuk is defeated by Ususaarmiarsunnguaq. In some East Greenland stories, Ususaarmiarsunnguaq has a strength matching that of the biggest giants living at the border of the inland ice. In fact, the East Greenland Kaassassuk received his powers from such a giant (Sonne 2005: doc. 315, 434). But Ususaarmiarsunnguaq is not Kaassassuk's adversary in East Greenland. Ususaarmiarsunnguaq fights another strong man, Kunuk, and is overcome by accident when the latter loses balance by stepping on a stone (!) to which a dog is tied.<sup>15</sup> Stumbling, Kunuk accidentally *squeezes* the shit (and/or blood) out of his opponent. Completely dizzy, Ususaarmiarsunnguaq admits defeat by referring to an earlier combat with the giant of the distant inland country who *did not* make him shit in his trousers (*ibid.*: doc. 434). Why then did the East Greenland Ususaarmiarsunnguaq lose the combat to Kunuk, and not to a giant of powers like those bestowed on Kaassassuk? Because, as one variant goes (*ibid.*: doc. 1013), Kunuk lost his empathy, meaning humanity (by a shock due to a narrow escape from some cannibals), i.e., his sense of the difference between animals and humans. Hence he indiscriminately killed both and became a mass murderer.

But still, why cannot the socially immature Kaassassuk match Aron's Ususaarmiarsunnguaq? Do they not possess equal non-human powers? In cosmological terms they do not, such as out at sea. Aron introduces the sea and it was into the sea that Ususaarmiarsunnguaq was about to hurl Kaassassuk. This is in contrast to the inland country, where Kaassassuk was hurled like a rolling stone by Pissaap Inua. A boulder does not roll along the surface of the sea; it goes right to the bottom. Aron already used this traditional dichotomy when Kaassassuk's *pinnga* forces were overturned by a gale. Furthermore, looking to another story by Aron about Pissaap Inua, the opposition between the inland country and the sea is turned into another one, i.e., of the inland country versus the bottom of a lake. To this bottom a loon dives for a salmon, whose liver is used by a father to cure his two young sons, promising hunters, of the scabies that a sorcerer inflicted out of jealousy. When cured, the boys are asked to approach Pissaap Inua, "a big fox, but not much bigger than an ordinary one." The boys are treated like Kaassassuk, but instead of turning wild and taking revenge, they become generous and socially responsible providers (*ibid.*: doc. 72). By structural interpretation, the shamanic powers represented here by the diving loon and the salmon, the latter migrating between sea and lake (land), would neutralise the *pinnga* forces, as bestowed by an explicitly minimised Pissaap Inua.

Though only published in Thorning et al. (1999), the last Aron story may have reached Jaakuaraq via still ongoing oral transmission and provided a model for both his Pissaap Inua—a big dog with a human face—and his funny ending.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, the

<sup>15</sup> Alternatively, he either slips on some frozen dog urine (Sonne 2005: doc. 993) or stumbles into a hole dug by dogs (*ibid.*: doc. 1013). Dog is the Inuit penis-symbol par excellence (e.g., Saladin d'Anglure 1986: 46) and is structurally ambiguous as well (Oosten 1989).

<sup>16</sup> A drawing of a sphinx in Atuagdliutit may have been another model (Thisted 1993).

subdued fun of Aron's variant is here reinforced. Further removed from pre-Christian tradition, Jaakuaraq has Ususaarmiarsunnguaq look even more dwarfish than Kaassassuk used to be. He is a mere inoffensive-looking, peevish shrimp, but with hidden powers and impossible to hold like a slippery salmon (*ibid.*: doc. 1395). The funny phallic references, however threatening they may appear, take the sting out of the stories. Similarly, Jaakuaraq ends his version by making a laughing stock of Kaassassuk. When defeated, the slain hero is not saved by Ususaarmiarsunnguaq's father from being hurled out into the dangerous sea. He is thrown into an inland freshwater lake from which he emerges covered with moss. Derisive laughter follows him to his tent where he remains out of view until he steals away. Jaakuaraq is less keen on stones. He has also Kaassassuk demonstrate the limit of his forces by squeezing a black stone and a white one. Instead of setting the rock walls in motion, he widens the clefts. But his inability to grow is not likened to that of a stone, and the piece of flint hidden in his foreskin is replaced with a knife.

### ***Kâgssagssuk* by Hans Lyngé**

Some 30 years after the Danish and Greenlandic publications of Jaakuaraq's variant, Hans Lyngé did not need to present the story in detail. In his play the storyline is obviously meant to be known beforehand to a sympathetic audience (Larsen n.d.). Monologues and dialogues dominate; several episodes are merely referred to, and past and present are mixed in palimpsest ways.

In the first of the play's three scenes, the orphan Kaassassuk, everybody's slave, starts out feeling sorry for himself. Only Sleep treats him nicely. An empathic old man then tells him how he became an orphan, and asks him to develop his strength by lifting big stones way up in the inland country (but not to call on Pissaap Inua). Having taken this advice, Kaassassuk in the second scene tells of his strength training, while he contemplates dragging the huge trunk of driftwood. The subsequent dramatic episodes are merely referred to in the following scene, namely his killing of three bears, his ensuing revenge that spared only his adoptive mother and the old man, and his marriage to Qaassuk's (spoiled) daughter. The acts of this second scene present Kaassassuk as newly married to the "useless" girl, who adores him and, typical of Lyngé (Sonne 2010), has an appeasing effect on him.

A trial is set in the third scene along the lines of a traditional song duel. Ususaarmiarsunnguaq is the prosecutor assisted by a female singer. The old man steps in as the defender, assisted by Kaassassuk's adoptive mother. Ususaarmiarsunnguaq presents the case, namely that nobody dares to stop Kaassassuk from overstepping his bounds because people are firmly convinced that his powers are divine. These powers (are said to) derive from Pissaap Inua, the Master of Power (Lyngé 1966: 14, 1967: 109). A female singing dancer rounds out the charge by sarcastically playing the part of Kaassassuk who, when still a small, dwarfish boy, had delusions of becoming the biggest man in Inuit country. His dream came true when he was knocked out by Pissaap Inua. But, she continues, he was unable to make good use of the powers, and

the children that he caressed burst! Deeply hurt and extremely upset, Kaassassuk is held back while Ususaarmiarsunnguaq continues his charge. Kaassassuk in his own imagination has powers bestowed by the infallible “spirits above,” but “for once these spirits were wrong” (*ibid.*). Nobody would call any powers divine that cause the death of innocent children. Nor did the revenge give him any peace of mind (in contrast to the ideal avenger of oral tradition).

The old man, by now presenting himself as *a poet*, with the associated right to interfere, explains the good reasons why Kaassassuk became a terror to all around him. People made him so by using him as a slave, by treating him inhumanely, and they alleviated their own mishaps by making a scapegoat out of him. Why then should he be judged by human standards? Next in turn, the adoptive mother mixes past with present by referring to the ancient story as a just and life-affirming one. She says her beloved son was permitted to take revenge by his teacher, the big fox (Pissaap Inua). He exterminated all his enemies along the entire coast. A laudable deed—and, I should add, in line with the tradition that praises the invincible avenger (Sonne 1982). “Make of him a legendary hero,” she declares. The old poet agrees: “She is right [...]. Nobody can change the bygone events related in the stories. They have become religion, *ileranartut* (‘to be handled with care, become taboo, are frightening’).<sup>17</sup> If Kaassassuk had defied the will of the spirits, he nevertheless took a just revenge that deserves merit in this country” (Lynge 1966: 16, 1967: 113). Unfortunately the meaning of the last sentences remains obscure, both in Greenlandic and in Lynge’s own translation into Danish. Apparently Kaassassuk ought to have defied the spirits’ will, but he did not and his revenge is felt to be just.

The defence makes Ususaarmiarsunnguaq change his mind. He offers Kaassassuk his friendship, which is to be sealed by a wrestling match. Kaassassuk accepts, they fight all day, and neither party plays any tricks. Kaassassuk is the first to lose breath (!), but the fight ends indecisively. Kaassassuk has met his match. *Nobody needs be afraid of Kaassassuk anymore*. He used to be the strongest man in the country, *but now is only an angry young man*. He “imagined [conceitedly] that he had received his power from above [...] but he nevertheless compels our respect by not having submitted to slavery, and he deserves praise because he did overcome his unavoidable fate by working himself up from scratch” (*ibid.*: 1966: 17ff, 1967: 115ff). This poor fate was conferred on him by his parents, who did not name him after some relative because they lost all hope of keeping him alive. Apparently to avoid hurting a deceased relative’s feelings, they named him Kaassassuk (‘The starving type’) or Kaassileqaagut (‘unavoidable fate’) in Lynge’s etymological interpretation of that name (*ibid.*: 1966: 4, 1967: 95).<sup>18</sup> Although the stories of old do not hide the vices of the past, as the epilogue tells us, they emphasise peoples’ reluctance to surrender unconditionally to the prevailing rules.

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. Briggs (1974[1970]: 343-347).

<sup>18</sup> Linguists have no clear etymological translation. Without a “real” name Kaassassuk is not socially integrated from the very beginning of his life.

Obviously, the lesson to be learned is a political one: Oppose the rules by force! Their divinity can be questioned. Get rid of fatalism, fight it, and if fought by a youthful anger it is nothing to fear. There shall reign reconciliation and equalisation between the two parties (Danes and Greenlanders). Indeed, the contemporary 1960s saw a radicalisation of Greenland's elite. Though by far their senior, Hans Lynge joined the Council of Young Greenlanders in Denmark around 1970 in their demand for political autonomy (Møtzfeldt 2006: 11-20). Home Rule was negotiated during the late 1970s, accorded in 1979, and implemented in 1980.

## Discussion

Certainly, stones are not prominent in Lynge's *Kâgssagssuk*. The boy's inability to grow is still likened to that of a stone, and Kaassassuk is advised to develop his muscles by lifting still bigger stones, but not to call on Pissaap Inua. This event is reserved for the old story, which is told by the two female actors: the singing dancer and the adoptive mother. Lynge made a drawing of Pissaap Inua with a handwritten text quoting Kaassassuk's lamentations and Pissaap Inua's presentation of himself: "I am Pissaap Inua; I shall approach you and give you strength. Don't get scared. Just close your eyes" (Larsen n.d.: 58ff). The drawing shows a boy inside an animal costume on all fours with holes for arms and legs with animal feet, looking rather dizzy with rolling eyes, but—as read by Larsen—curious in the posture of a playful dog and child-friendly being who is careful not to scare the poor boy (Kaalund et al. 2006: 86; Kleivan 1996; Larsen n.d.: 59). Jaakuaraq's Pissaap Inua, a big dog with a human face—already made less fearful by Aron—has by Lynge been given a theatrical role, albeit one never staged.

Turning to Aron's *pinnga* powers to roll stones, to move supporting mountains, to send gales from the inland country to overturn the unskilled kayaker, and to squeeze stones, we see that all of these feats have given way to Lynge's "spirits above," whose divinity is questioned. Contemporary judgement tells us that the children burst because Kaassassuk did not know how to use his powers properly. These *pinnga* powers are ambiguously presented: neutral in the past, but wrong in both past and present (by permitting the killing of innocent children). Spiritualised, they are discussed in terms of morality and responsibility alone. The symbolism of cosmological forces is shoved into the background. This is in contrast to the free rein Hans Lynge gives the forces of nature in the novel of his youth, *Ersíngitsûp píumassâ* ('The Will of the Invisible One') written in 1938, and published together with *Kâgssagssuk* (Lynge 1967). In the novel, an overall idea of nature, differing from tradition, comes clearly to the fore. As rightly underlined by both Petersen (2006: 101-109) and Thisted (in Lynge 1990), the impact of Western romanticism is obvious: nature swings according to the mental fluctuations of the hero, Ulloriaq. Together with his brother, he has carried out the traditional duty of revenge by killing their beloved stepfather, who had justly murdered their brutal biological father. Struck by guilt, he leaves society but is followed by his true love, whose attempts to console he refuses. Only when she is taken ill and about to die does his fear of losing her become aroused. This fear leads to a climax of his crisis,

accompanied by scenes of magnificent nature.<sup>19</sup> Ulloriaq emerges as a shaman who can now see the will of the Invisible One. According to Thisted, love and reconciliation have replaced the duty of revenge, and Ulloriaq represents Christ as prophesied by the God of the Old Testament (*ibid.*).<sup>20</sup> Indeed in the novel, the love that overcomes any implacability confounds brotherly love with sexual love (Sonne 2010).

By comparison, the revenge taken by Kaassassuk was considered just, and a laudable feat, by Lynge because he had been ill-treated and had successfully fought his slave status. Nevertheless, are not the same forces at play first in the novel's will of the invisible God in nature and next in the play's "will of the spirits above"? As emphasised by Thisted (in Lynge: 1990: 104), the Invisible One is identified by Lynge as Sila, namely the source of shamanic power as told to Knud Rasmussen by the Caribou Inuit shaman Igjugaarjuk in 1922. The report in English relates how Igjugaarjuk in telling his account identified *Pinnga*, the local Mistress of the Caribou, with both *Hila* (*Sila*) and *Nuliayuk*. Rasmussen (1930a: 51ff) excluded Nuliayuk (Sedna, the Sea Woman) as a possible identification, and settled on Sila rather than Pinnga as Igjugaarjuk's source of shamanic power. As dealt with at length elsewhere (Sonne 1986, 1988), Rasmussen elevated the position of Silap Inua, using the theory advanced during the Fifth Thule Expedition by Birket-Smith, namely that the Caribou Inuit represented the proto-Eskimo culture. Sila thus became—in academic research—the primordial high god of the Inuit. But Birket-Smith's theory was eventually disproved by Burch (1978).

Nevertheless, this high position given Sila by Rasmussen was used to support a reassessment of pre-Christian religion by Greenlanders like Hans Lynge and his educated contemporaries. They hardly read the report in English (Rasmussen 1930a), as they were already familiar with the events of the expedition in the Danish version (1925-26). In this publication, Nuliayuk is absent from the passage, Pinnga is relegated to a commentary, and Igjugaarjuk's Pinnga is subsumed under Sila. It reads: "[...] In religious terms the word Sila is used about a power to be achieved by humans—a power personified in Silap Inua: the *Lord of Power* or literally The proprietor of power" (Rasmussen 1925-26, I: 178, my translation and emphasis). The Pissaap Inua of the South Greenland Kaassassuk is identified with Sila (and Pinnga) by Rasmussen. But however much Lynge embraced the primordial Sila through the romanticism of his *Ersíngitsûp píumassâ*, he did not agree with Rasmussen's identification of an elevated Pissaap Inua. Absent from the novel and presented as a fictitious creature in the play, this figure belongs to the past, a morally ambiguous being representing both a licence to kill indiscriminately and a power to undo a miserable fate. Nevertheless, Sila is present in *Kâgssagssuk* in the sense of "intelligence." The old man is from the outset amazed by the poor boy's intelligence and later, after the slaughter, when Kaassassuk empathetically "reads" how the old man feels both grateful for having been spared and

<sup>19</sup> For a brilliant translation of this chapter into English see Fortescue (1990).

<sup>20</sup> Thisted (in Lynge 1990) takes a Lutheran approach and sees a similar prophesying God in Aron's Pissaap Inua, who orders Kaassassuk to keep his strength secret until he, Pissaap Inua, shall send signs for their disclosure.



humiliated by the terrifying act. The latter exclaims ironically: “Why can’t you be content with being a chief, why do you want to be omniscient as well?” Exonerated by the poet’s defence, Kaassassuk has changed into an intelligent rebel fighting (colonial) fate.

## Conclusion

If we follow the fate of the Kaassassuk figure in Greenland’s history from oral tradition to literacy and then to literature up to the 1960s, the main changes are obvious. Initially an unmanageable threat to society, Kaassassuk becomes, under Aron’s Christian influence, a self-reflective individual who admits and even demonstrates defeat. Next, he is ridiculed good-naturedly by Jaakuaraq. Finally, he is developed into a very complex figure by the cultural debater Hans Lynge. Both Aron and Jaakuaraq implicitly let their contemporary ideas decide the course of events, whereas Lynge explicitly confronts the past with the present. Kaassassuk’s revenge now becomes excusable on the grounds of past social conditions and religious belief. The story’s message is the pleasure of having left behind these conditions and the fact that Kaassassuk against all odds victoriously overcame them for himself in that past. The story’s “Greenland soul,” turns out to be Kaassassuk’s mental power to free himself. Although nobody fears him anymore, Lynge transforms Kaassassuk into an ideal revolutionary who accepts his opponent’s insights and good will. After all, Lynge’s true opponents were the fatalism, passivity, submission, and narrow outlook of his compatriots.

Context must be understood to trace and interpret changes in stories and literature. Stories change according to personal preferences, individual talent, literacy, target group, social history, and global history. Thus by examining the source, date, writer, teller, content, and level of literacy of each variant, outstanding changes made by outstanding writers like Aron come to the fore. His ancestry calls for comparison with East Greenland variants. In his district near Nuuk, Christianity took firm root in the early 19th century. The local mission stressed religious emotions and put an end to feuds, which would explain both the individualisation of Kaassassuk and the ban put on killing him by Ususarmiarsunnguaq’s father. By the time of Jaakuaraq, Western influences were bringing forth Greenland’s incipient literature, paganism was dwindling, and the fun of the old stories could be emphasised. In the 1960s, Hans Lynge and his educated contemporaries added cultural “roots” to issues of national identity and politics, and these issues have remained on the agenda for decades (e.g., Thuesen 1988). Still, why did Aron alone pick out and emphasize traditional *pinnga* forces as his means of making his break with the traditional versions? The reason is that his target audience was familiar with both written literature and a still vivid oral tradition. More than any other version it communicated a traditional, if implicit, cosmology of the powers from up behind and above. I did not see that structure until I completed my analysis of stones in Inuit myth and ritual. As I have come upon other cases, my coming working hypothesis goes like this: in a period of transition, the traditional mythic context of a story becomes reinforced.

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