

## Robert Petersen (1928-2021)

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## Robert Petersen (1928-2021)

Professor Emeritus Robert Petersen, who passed away in Odense (Denmark) on October 23, 2021 at the age of 93, was a prominent Greenlandic Inuit scholar known internationally for his research and publications on traditional and contemporary Inuit culture, society, and language. He was a founder and the first president of Ilisimatusarfik, the University of Greenland. In 1992, he was awarded an honorary doctorate from Université Laval in Québec City, and in 2010 received a second one from Ilisimatusarfik.



**Figure 1.** Robert Petersen at home, Odense 2002 (Photo L.-J. Dorais)

Born on April 18, 1928 in Maniitsoq, on the central west coast of Greenland, Robert Petersen was the son of Ole Petersen, an office clerk, and Jakobine Rosing, and younger brother to Hans Christian Petersen, who would become a noted specialist of Greenlandic folklore. From an early age, he was curious about studying his environment. One of his childhood mates remembered him spending his spare time examining rocks, plants, and insects with a magnifying glass (Lene Kielsen, personal communication, 1994). It is no wonder that after completing his elementary schooling in Maniitsoq, where he began learning Danish as a second language, he was

admitted to Ilinniarfissuaq, Greenland's teachers' college in Nuuk. As a leisure activity, he developed a talent for drawing cartoons, some of which later appeared in local newspapers.

Following his graduation from Ilinniarfissuaq in 1948, Petersen moved to Denmark to pursue his training, and received a Danish teaching licence in 1953. He then went back to Nuuk, where he taught at Ilinniarfissuaq from 1954 to 1956. As he later reminisced in an interview I did with him in 1994, during those teaching years, he was struck by the fact that a majority of his students were unable to write Kalaallisut without making spelling errors. In actual fact, the official orthography at that time had been devised by linguist and educator Samuel Kleinschmidt in the middle of the 19th century. However, the spoken language had much evolved over the last 100 years and no longer fit the Kleinschmidt spelling. As Petersen had decided to go back to Denmark to further his education, part of his motivation became helping to solve the ongoing problem with orthography. He therefore studied linguistics and anthropology in Copenhagen, completing his terminal *Magisterkonferens* degree (the former Danish equivalent to a PhD) in 1967, under the supervision of Eskimologist Erik Holtved. In 1957, he had married Inge Hansen, a Danish nurse originally from the Odense area in Funen.

In 1969, Robert Petersen was hired as a lecturer at the recently established Department of Eskimology (Institut for Eskimologi) of the University of Copenhagen, and became full professor in 1975, the first Greenlander to achieve this feat. He also sat on a state committee that planned an orthographic reform for Kalaallisut. The proposed spelling system, much better adapted to present-day pronunciation standards, became official in 1973. Petersen had thus reached his original goal. Of course, this was not a reason to cease his university teaching, nor his research and published works. With the revised orthography now adopted, Petersen and the committee set to the task of compiling a new Kalaallisut-Danish dictionary. A first version was published in 1977 and a second enlarged one appeared thirteen years later (Berthelsen et al. 1990).

When Greenland acceded to Home Rule in 1979, it was decided that the country should have its own higher-level teaching institution. In 1983, Petersen was invited to move back to Nuuk to chair a newly created Inuit Institute, which awarded degrees in Greenlandic and pan-Inuit studies. Under his chairmanship, the Institute rapidly increased its academic activities to become a fully-fledged university (Ilisimatusarfik/University of Greenland) in 1987, with Petersen as its rector (president). From the beginning, the rector made it clear that the academic level of Ilisimatusarfik must equal that of other Danish and foreign higher learning institutions (Petersen 2001, 325).

When Robert Petersen retired in 1995, Ilisimatusarfik had developed undergraduate, Masters, and PhD programmes in four disciplines ranging

from humanities and social sciences to theology and administration. Upon his retirement, Petersen moved to Denmark once again, settling in Odense with his wife (d. 1997). He remained very active in the areas of publishing, lecturing, and consulting for various committees. Ilisimatusarfik awarded him an honorary doctorate in 2010, as Université Laval had done in 1992.

Robert Petersen was widely recognized as the foremost Greenlandic intellectual of his generation in the fields of social sciences and linguistics, as well as a world-class arctic scholar, publishing many outstanding works. A bibliography of his writings between 1944 and 1995 lists 419 books, articles, chapters, and reports he wrote in Kalaallisut, Danish, and English (Hansen 1996). These publications—plus his post-1995 works—dealt with, among other topics, Greenlandic and pan-Inuit traditional culture and society; the phonology and dialectology of Kalaallisut and other Inuit languages; Inuit prehistory; mythology; and present-day cultural and social issues. In addition to his writings were innumerable lectures and talks at both national and international scholarly conferences.

Robert Petersen was always eager to participate actively in the academic, scientific, and political developments of his time. He sat on a large number of committees, boards, and commissions for various universities, scientific associations, scholarly journals (including *Études Inuit Studies*), and government organizations in both Greenland and Denmark, as well as abroad. Among his many contributions, Petersen notably participated in working groups set up by the Greenlandic Home Rule administration, the Inuit Circumpolar Council, the Nordic Council, the Canadian Inuit Language Commission, and the International Arctic Social Sciences Association (as its vice-president from 1995 to 1998). He also found it important to disseminate knowledge among the general public through many talks on the Greenlandic and Danish radio and a large number of newspaper articles; at least one collection of his talks has appeared in book form (Petersen 1987).

Many of Robert Petersen's accomplishments have been publicly recognized. In addition to his two honorary doctorates, other distinctions include the Prize for Scientific Vulgarisation of the Danish Authors' Association (1977), membership in the Gustav Adolf Academy of Sweden (1985), the Cultural Award of the Greenlandic Home Rule (1993), the Bill Edmunds Award of the Inuit Circumpolar Council (1995), and the Greenland Home Rule Nersornaat Medal of Merit (1996). His role in the modern Inuit world was best summarized in the following quote from a *Festschrift* published on the occasion of his retirement:

Whenever approached by an institution, an organization, or a group of people for an opinion in matters relating to improving the situation of Inuit today, he never declined. His views were offered with incredible insight and passion, and always with great integrity. (Andreasen 1996, 9)

On November 1, 2021, Ilisimatusarfik, the university Petersen helped to establish in 1987 and had chaired until his retirement in 1995, opened the obituary posted on its website with these words:

It is with great sadness that we have received the news of Robert Petersen's passing. Ilisimatusarfik and Greenland have lost a giant. We have lost a giant, because Robert Petersen's work was enormous—and he was a pioneer in most. Robert was the first Inuit researcher to do international research—and he was the first Greenlandic professor of what was then called Eskimology at the University of Copenhagen. (Ilisimatusarfik 2021)

The only thing I can add to the preceding quotes is that the scientific, social, and political views of Robert Petersen were not only offered with insight, passion, and scholarship, but also with a very subtle—and very Inuit—sense of humour.

*A large part of this text draws its inspiration from a former article of mine (Dorais 2005).*

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