Ivory carvings by Egon Poulsen (Kap Dan, Kulusuk, East Greenland)



Bisexual figure, sperm whale tooth, 16 cm, early 1960s

According to Egon Poulsen, who some years later was shown a photograph of this carving (see below), it represents his personal version of an Uizerq, a supernatural being that can assume different forms according to the situation in which it acts (e.g., sent on a vengeful mission by an individual or a shaman, it takes on the heteromorphic appearance of a tupilak).

Egon Poulsen (born 1925) was the son of one of the most gifted and prolific Ammassalik area carvers, Georg Poulsen (1901-1962), who was a son of Pavia and grandson of Utuak. Georg Utuak was known as Kion (the Greenlandic pronunciation of Georg) and as Pibaï, one of his Eskimo names. He chose the surname Poulsen after the Danish form of his father's Christian name (Poul), when the Danish administration required everyone to take a family name at the end of the 1940's. (For examples of masks carved by Georg Poulsen and collected in 1934-1935, see Gessain, 1984).



Bruce White photos

Woman flensing a seal, early 1960s

(Sperm whale tooth, woman + seal = 18 cm, originally mounted on plywood)

Provenance: Collection of Jakob Sivartsen, Manager, Kap Dan KGH (Kongelige Grønlandske Handel/Royal Greenland Trade), 1974

Literature:

Gessain, R. (1975): Uizerq, L'amant - un personage de la mythologie des Ammassalimiut (côte est du Groenland). *Objets et Mondes*, 15:319-329.

Gessain, R. (1984): Dance Masks of Ammassalik, Arctic Anthropology, 21:81-107.

Mathiassen, T. (1933): Prehistory of the Angmassalik Eskimos. Reitzels Forlag, Copenhagen, Fig. 62, p. 142 (Meddelelser om Grønland, Vol. 92, Nr. 4).

R. genain. 7.1.80

Cher Marrin

Hja bien løngtemp que vous m'orige envoye des photographer Sobjet-Elleme de votre collection et speculiment une sculpture d'un être ciserné. J' ai attendu pour avoir de reuseignements our att figurine hermaghoditi. fact for Egan Poulsen on Kuluanh -Egen à pri en a montre la photogophe ei votre à tatrette là ce suits recomme comme étant fonte par en au sibrit des onnées 1960 Sitil - Had olind out pur ala reformbal un "topiel2" mais rapidement il a explopme que toutes la statuette faite pur être verdur aux etranjus etaient designeer for tupiall" (an singular!!) can c'était le soul mot que les strangers com. prenavent - En reidite ein un fryme ar legende representant un "nuliaser" on Wiser (avez vors l'article pur fai fublier sur ce sujet "lizer l'amont"? un mine across personnys over dusc runs selon (li = man-éjoux nulia : femme éjuse) Egon reconnant que contrairement a la representation inaditionalle de Muliareq

Il via jos reposente les seins, il ne jent jos explipion la raison de ce mangue -Il ajente qu'un cutains nombre de détails en sa sulfture sur le produt er sa proper imagination for ex: un one ferme - consu per eur somme une so quetteni firmimine une fagur de clin d'acil provolvent la difference en Konnilà (la cotta) un quant Ramik an Jumm it un jett Parnik d'komme Egon ert le fel Tun grand sulftan main. twom deude Kist georg Utual que a change on nom en georg Poulson quant or a obby: or ammanalimint a funda wa now de formille. J'espere que os severyssements vos interseint et que un me for-Jumerez en vem & avoir jout. attendre a · longtemp heillur sous-fra l'armee muelle

for vous meine et form voter Jume -

ent at a grapathie. RoberHerami

- Je reste toujour à votre surportion se l'eau - Te vois far enrager en publication demandes Cher Monsieur,

It has been quite a long time since you sent me photographs of Eskimo objects from your collection and especially a sculpture of a bisexual being. I have waited to get information on this hermaphroditic figurine, made by Egon Poulsen from Kulusuk.

Egon, who was shown the photograph of your statuette, immediately recognized it as having been made by him *at the beginning of the 1960s*. He said at first that it represented a "tupilak", but quickly explained that all of the statuettes made for sale to foreigners were called "tupilak" (in the singular!!)¹ because it was the only word that they understood. In reality, it is a legendary figure representing a "nuliaser" or "Uiser" (do you have the article that I published on the subject of "Uizerq the Lover"?)². This is the same character with two names, depending on whether one considers it to be a masculine or feminine being (Ui = my husband, nulia = woman wife). Egon recognized that contrary to the traditional representation of Nuliaseq he has not represented the breasts. He could not explain the reason why these were missing.

He added that a certain number of details of his sculpture are the product of his own imagination, for example:

One eye closed - conceived by him as a feminine coquetry, a kind of provocative wink. The difference of the Kamiks (the boots) - one large woman's Kamik and a small man's Kamik.

Egon is the son of a great sculptor [especially of wood masks] who is now deceased, Kion Georg Utuak, who changed his name to Georg Poulsen when the Ammassalimiut were obliged by the Danish administration to take a family name.

I hope that this information will be of interest to you and that you will excuse my having made you wait so long.

Best wishes for the New Year to you and your wife.

Best regards,

Robert Gessain

I am always available if you would like other information on Ammassalik, and am sending you the publications you requested.

¹The plural of tupilak is given in different places as tupilek or tupila(i)t, but the orthography of the East Greenlandic dialect has not been standardized, and many people use only the singular form, that they consider invariable.

²See below and accompanying complete copy of Gessain: Uizerq, L'amant - un personage de la mythologie des Ammassalimiut (côte est du Groenland). *Objets et Mondes*, 15: 319-329 (1975).

Anthropologie biologique et sociale des Ammassalimiut, enquêtes programmées par R. Gessain, nº 24

UIZERQ, L'AMANT un personnage de la mythologie des Ammassalimiut (côte est du Groenland)

par Robert GESSAIN

Contribution à l'étude de la bisexualité dans la mythologie des Ammassalimiut (Eskimo de la côte est du Groenland). Différents aspects du personnage mythique *Uizerq*, l'Amant bisexué, y sont analysés particulièrement dans leurs rappors avec les shamans, en s'appuyant sur des textes et des figurines sculptées rassemblés par l'auteur ou d'autres membres des expéditions françaises au Groenland en 1934-35-36.

Contribution to the study of the mythology of the Ammassalimiut (Eskimo of Eastern Greenland). Various aspects of the mythical personage *Uizerq* — the bisexual Lover — are analysed, especially regarding shamans, from texts and sculptures collected by the author and other members of the French expeditions to Greenland in 1934-35-36.

Le thème de la bisexualité chez les Ammassalimiut se retrouve sous divers aspects et dans différents contextes, des poupées-jouets de petites filles aux expériences de l'angakok, shaman local.

Divers documents, légendes, mythes, témoignages, statuettes furent récoltés depuis 1884, date de la découverte de cette tribu eskimo de quelque 400 personnes dont les ancêtres étaient venus par plusieurs vagues migratoires de la lointaine Sibérie. La plupart de ces récits et objets ont été recueillis depuis 1934 jusqu'à nos jours par des membres de notre laboratoire, mais quelques-uns le furent par nos devanciers. Je me propose de les publier ici et d'en tenter, malgré les lacunes de notre documentation, une interprétation valable pour l'état actuel de nos connaissances.

Que des données importantes pour notre sujet aient été observées par les Danois et Groenlandais, découvreurs d'Ammassalik (G. Holm, Hanserak, Johan Petersen), puis par le linguiste ethnologue W. Thalbitzer et non décrites par eux est malheureusement d'une grande probabilité; les uns et les autres ont en effet dit que leurs écrits étaient écourtés et expurgés, dans des termes similaires à ceux employés par l'un d'eux, G. Holm, parlant des choses vues et entendues en 1884 (1914, p. 229): « My having left out... the scenes which were described too realistically to be put down on paper ». Plus tard une morale luthérienne trop zélée rendit mal aisée à Ammassalik l'expression de ce qui touchait à la sexualité. Ce qui pourrait expliquer que nous n'ayons trouvé aucune référence à *Uizerq* dans l'important corpus de légendes recueillies, avant nous, à Ammassalik.

Le terme désignant à Ammassalik cet être bisexué est prononcé diversement selon les lieux et les informateurs : *Uizerq* ; *Uisak* ; *Uersaq*. Toutes ces variantes dérivent de *ui* : le mari ; *uisak* ou *uitsak* signifie le futur mari, le fiancé, terme que l'on retrouve sur la côte ouest du Groenland et au Labrador. *Uersaq* qui est la forme entendue chez les gens de Sermilik, partie sud du district d'Ammassalik, correspond au terme *Uerksaq* de l'Ungava signifiant, d'après L. Schneider, un démon masculin qui a des rapports impurs avec une femme. *Uishuk* ou *uishugék* est traduit par le même auteur par forni-

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PREHISTORY OF THE ANGMAGSSALIK ESKIMOS

BY

THERKEL MATHIASSEN

WITH 64 FIGURES IN THE TEXT AND 11 PLATES

KØBENHAVN C. A. REITZELS FORLAG

BIANCO LUNOS BOGTRYKKERI A/S
1933

across a bone comb, but most people have the horn or celluloid comb sold by the store; the back scratcher is met with here and there.

All the ancient ornamentation with nailed-on bone figures has disappeared; they no longer take the time to decorate their possessions as they once did. Some of the older men have not yet lost the art, and make miniature pails, throwing boards, eye-shades and caskets for sale; the caskets, which are like the old tool boxes, are decorated — indeed plastered — with bone figures, not alone the usual seal and whale figures



Fig. 62. Tupilait (troll animals) carved in wood. 1:2.

but also human beings in all kinds of attitudes, houses, bears, tupilaks and other mystic beings. Fig. 61 is a modern, richly decorated casket. Gradually as the old men die this art will become extinct or degenerate; there are some young men who try to take it up, but as a rule they only turn out poorly made imitations of this fine old art.

One artistic acquisition is the tupileqs and other mystic beings which several people have started to carve in wood in recent years. In former days these were not made; a few poorly made specimens have been made previously¹), but during the past few years their manufacture — for sale — has grown, often with considerable artistic success. The collection which I acquired contains a lot of small figures of this kind. Figg. 62—64 are some of them, all having names and representing certain figures in their old religion and mythology.

Fig. 62a is uvissoq, a tupileq, who is half man, half woman but has a seal flipper and a dog foot. Fig. 62b is nerrisiaq, a remarkable,

¹⁾ Thalbitzer 1914, Figg. 354-55.