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MITÂRTUT

VESTIGES OF THE ESKIMO SEA-WOMAN
CULT IN WEST GREENLAND

BY

INGE KLEIVAN

KØBENHAVN

C. A. REITZELS FORLAG

BIANCO LUNOS BOGTRYKKERIA/S

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I. INTRODUCTION

When HANS EGEDE began his religious work in West Greenland in 1721 he considered it his mission to eradicate everything associated with the heathen beliefs of the Greenlanders, and in fact all their practices which to him were contrary to the teachings of Christianity.

He was a zealous man and he did not hesitate to administer corporal chastisement to the refractory. In his diary for January 1729 he relates how he had heard of some people having exchanged wives at a local feast. At a gathering of married couples a man had taken the floor and chanted a drum song, whereafter he and a woman had withdrawn behind a curtain of skin stretched across the platform. Shortly afterwards they had made room for the next couple. As a consequence, EGEDE travelled to the settlement and treated the people to a torrent of abuse. He closes his report as follows: "And in order to give more weight to my reprimands and threats I had them flogged, through one of my men, on their bare bodies, which they took with much patience and promised not to do it again" (HANS EGEDE 1925, p. 217).

Christianity gained a footing in the subsequent period and many pagan customs—at any rate those likely to offend the missionaries—seemingly disappeared. But secretly, especially in more out-of-the-way places where the clerics seldom came, the memories of the ancient beliefs were kept alive long afterwards.

Then the Greenlanders learned to observe the Dano-Norwegian festivals and religious holidays. Moreover, the Moravian Brethren had a mission in South Greenland from 1733 to 1900, and features of their particular mode of observing the feasts spread to large sections of the population.

However, religion was not the only influence to spread in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The many Scandinavian employees of the Greenland Trade Department, a number of whom married Greenland girls and remained in the country for the rest of their lives, introduced more of their national customs, dances and games which the native population adopted, but often in slightly altered form.

In the twentieth century, however, the ever-growing Danish influence caused many of these traits of the old Nordic folk culture to succumb to modern forms of life. A natural outcome of this development has, of course, also been that little remains of customs and ideas associated with the ancient Eskimo beliefs.

A comparison of the earliest accounts of Greenland's social and cultic life with what we know of other Eskimo groups reveals no record of large, annual feasts such as those in Alaska and parts of Canada. However, in the present century brief descriptions have often been given of an apparently ancient Eskimo festival custom connected with one particular season of the year. It has to do with the so-called *mitârtut* (sing. *mitârtoq*), that is to say soot-smearing or masked persons, often furnished with a large imitation penis, making their appearance at many places in Greenland, chiefly in the days around the Epiphany.

II. WEST GREENLAND MITÂRTOQ CUSTOMS

Mitârtut in a philological light.

The early dictionaries contain no reference to special *mitârtoq* customs. *Mitârtoq* is the intransitive participle of the verb *mitârpoq*, which in PAUL EGEDE's dictionary of 1750 is rendered as "frolics, jests"; and in his dictionary of 1804 OTTO FABRICIUS adds: "is clownish in his ways". SAMUEL KLEINSCHMIDT's dictionary of 1871 also gives the translation: "grimaces, makes faces". In the latest dictionary to appear, published by SCHULTZ-LORENTZEN in 1926, the translation is: "pulls faces, grimaces, dresses himself up (especially on Twelfth Night)".

These dictionaries all give the word *mitârpoq* as a derivative of *mitagpâ*: "jeers at him, scoffs him". WILLIAM THALBITZER, however, interpreted *mitârpoq* as "cult of the celestial *mitat*". As to the meaning of this latter word he quotes the account of the French missionary PINART from South Alaska. On Kodiak Island, PINART wrote, *mitat* was the term for human souls of the type which, after a five times repeated transmigration on earth, was admitted to the celestial lands (sun, moon, certain stars and the northern lights). In other words, THALBITZER considered that an ancestor worship was behind the *mitârtoq* customs (THALBITZER 1932, p. 19, and HANSËRAK 1933, p. 198).

It is questionable, however, whether this linguistic similarity provides adequate justification for such a conclusion, considering that there is nothing else to support it either in Greenland or along the enormous stretch from Kodiak to Greenland.

One example of the use of the word *mitârtoq* in recent Greenland literature is to be found in a play by PAVIA PETERSEN: *Ikingutigit* ("The

Friends”), written in 1939. In it are two spirits, a good one and a bad one, both trying to influence mankind. The good spirit bears the name of Pigârtoq (“The Vigil Keeper”) and must help humanity, whereas the other is called Mitârtoq and plays the role of the evil spirit who helps to sow trouble between people. That the author called the bad spirit Mitârtoq was perhaps because, being a Greenland catechist, he recognized the mitârtut as a survival of ancient paganism. A suggestion that he had the dressed-up, face-blackened mitârtut in mind is provided by the small incident that whenever Mitârtoq has whispered his wicked counsel the listening one goes round with a sooty ear.

An archaeological find possibly connected with mitârtoq customs.

As has been said, the literature is of little help in tracing the mitârtoq customs far back in time. On the other hand, evidence from an entirely different quarter, archaeology, indicates that these customs may have ancient roots in Greenland. While excavating at Utorqait in the Kangâmiut district THERKEL MATHIASSEN found a penis carved in antler in a house ruin which in his opinion is datable to the period 1350—1500. It was made complete with all anatomical details, including a canal which perhaps used to be connected with a bladder of water or the like. Naturally, it is impossible to say definitely that this penis was used in conjunction with mitârtoq-like practices, but there is the possibility (MATHIASSEN 1931, pp. 106—07).

References to mitârtut in the literature.

The first brief description of mitârtut, though without making use of this word, was given by A. BERTELSEN in “Beretning om Fødslerne i Grønland og de seksuelle Forhold sammesteds”, 1907, where he states that “... in the Christmas season at several of the North Greenland colonies one may see a dance between two masked individuals, of which one is always equipped with an enormous phallus, and the clou of the dance is a grotesque imitation of the sexual act.” (BERTELSEN 1907, p. 556).

From Godhavn in North Greenland M. PORSILD relates in 1915 that children and young people on Twelfth Night run about from house to house in grotesque disguises and wearing facial masks of skin or wood. Females wear male dress and some are furnished with large imitation penes. These dressed-up persons perform curious dances and must not speak, but simply make unintelligible sounds. (PORSILD 1915, p. 248).

A narrative from South Greenland tells that it was once the custom there for one of the mitârtut to have a bladder full of blood concealed at

his chest; one of the others would stab him, the blood flowed out and he fell over as if dead, but then was called back to life by a third mitârtoq. (BIRKET-SMITH 1924, p. 402).

As long ago as in 1911 THALBITZER drew attention to the West Greenland Shrovetide custom, as he called it, of two or more young men in disguise and with smears of soot on their cheeks, walking about in the houses, singing and begging (mitârtut). (THALBITZER 1911, p. 88).

Later on, THALBITZER wrote a more copious account (1925), one that seems based upon other sources. There he stated that formerly it was the custom to hold the so-called "beggars' feast", qinusaqâtâufik, round about January 1st. Children and adults assembled and by means of a guessing game decided who should go out begging. The beggars were called mitârtut and their leader was to sing a short verse as follows:

mitârtoq iserpoq	"the mitârtoq has come in,
qitingniarit	"dance
qinusarniartlutit	"while you beg for something"

(THALBITZER 1925, p. 246)¹⁾

In 1939, when JETTE BANG made her Greenland film, she persuaded children of Søndre Upervik in North Greenland to act as mitârtut outside the season proper, which, she says, was between New Year and Twelfth Night or at some places at Shrovetide. The children performed "their wild and sensuous dance" almost naked, smeared with soot and fat. Some wore grotesque masks of paper, others had distorted their faces by tying string across mouth and nose (JETTE BANG 1943, pp. 39—40).

Finally, in a description of his boyhood at Kangâmiut at about the end of last century the Greenlanders OLE KREUTZMANN related how mitârtut, blackened with soot and wearing wretched old clothes, used to go into the houses and dance during Epiphany. The grown-ups laughed with amusement at them and paid them small sums of money, whereas the children were terrorstricken and hid under the bed-clothing. KREUTZMANN concludes with the remark that this custom has now disappeared (KREUTZMANN 1958, p. 22).

Nevertheless, the mitârtoq customs are fully alive to this day at many places in Greenland, both north and south.

¹⁾ THALBITZER's translation reads:

The beggar has stepped in,
Dance and be gay!
He begs you for a gift.

Observations of mitârtut at Fiskenæsset 1954.

In 1954 while at Fiskenæsset, a trading station in South Greenland with a population of about 200, I had occasion to watch how mitârtut there played their game. They began on January 5th, Twelfth Night, and were very active during the next two days or so; interest in them gradually subsided and by the end of January it was over.

These mitârtut always acted individually. In daytime children and young girls were performers; in the evening and at night it was the young unmarried men.

Some had their faces and hands completely blackened; others wore masks of pieces of dehaired skin or of cardboard. They were dressed either in old rags or in clothing much too big for them. Usually it was donned back to front and stuffed, so the mitârtoq appeared to be of tremendous girth. Most of them had an imitation penis attached to their dress, made of a piece of paper or dehaired skin, rolled up into a tube, or a long strip of skin. One mitârtoq had an empty meat can dangling between his legs; another had a seal bladder hanging, inflated and filled with water which slowly dripped out.

In one hand the mitârtut carried a stick, and in the other most of them had the wing of a large bird which, having been rubbed well against a sooty stove, left a mark at the slightest touch.

In both appearance and behaviour there was a curious blend of laughable and terrifying elements.

Children dressed as mitârtut ran around from house to house, wielding stick and wing and chasing the inhabitants until at last, in order to escape they gave the mitârtut presents in the form of sweets, cakes, figs etc. To show his appreciation the mitârtoq began to dance with stiff, comical movements of a sexual character, the spectators howling with delight. While all this was going on the mitârtoq was persistently solemn and made no sound whatever, even when people did what they could to make him laugh. If they succeeded, the game was up; he would have to listen to such sarcastic and humorous remarks about his failure as a performer that he had no choice but to go home.

On his round of the houses the mitârtoq always had a train of jeering children behind him, and occasionally he would turn and face them when they became too annoying. Screaming shrilly they then fled in all directions, pursued by the mitârtoq who tried to hit them with the stick or smear them with the bird wing.

The few girls acting the part of mitârtut, dressed up as men, took turns in frequenting a small open space in front of the cooper's workshop where people were wont to meet for a chat. There, without uttering a single word they were able to entertain large numbers by their queer,

improvised dances. Usually the dancing consisted of clumsy hopping, head wagging and hip swaying in slow rhythm, at the same time wielding the stick and the wing dangerously close to the onlookers, who tried to hide one behind the other. Then suddenly the mitârtoq, waving her arms wildly would begin a furious chase of the people who tried to escape by running round and round the little cooperage. Handicapped by her disguise the mitârtoq was rarely able to overtake anybody, but several times resorted to the stratagem of turning suddenly and running the other way round the house, to the uproarious confusion of the people now unexpectedly running up against the mitârtoq and her weapons. During these days quite a number went about with soot marks on their clothing.

After dark it was the young men's turn to dress up as mitârtut. At Fiskensæssæt, as at so many other places in Greenland, the young people are in the habit of sauntering about in small groups of an evening. The young are those who are no longer children, i.e. they have been confirmed, and are not old, which means that they are not married. This distinction was observed punctiliously; no young school children or young married folks ever took part in these evening walks and mitârtoq games.

If a group of young people caught sight of a dark figure some distance away they joined hands and fled headlong. But if they found they were not being pursued they resumed their walk, keeping a careful look-out for a real mitârtoq. If one suddenly stepped out from the shadow of a house and made a threatening gesture with the stick, the band panicked again and took to their heels. On discovering that the mitârtoq was incapable of overtaking anyone, however, they became bolder and returned, but keeping a cautious distance from his stick. Such a mitârtoq had not much time for dancing, being fully occupied in making sallies against the young people around him. But if he was fleet-footed they soon abandoned collective flight and had to depend upon their individual ability to escape. The mitârtoq's particular quarry was the girls, and if he caught one she was overturned on the snow, cuddled and kissed and smeared with soot.

The pantomimic art displayed by these mitârtut was often of no mean order. It happened one evening that a flock of girls closely pursued by a mitârtoq fled to the church and stood facing him in front of the door. The mitârtoq, who was right on their heels, drew up suddenly three or four metres from the church and staggered backwards. With head lowered he made another attempt but was stopped again as by an invisible wall. This was repeated several times, and at last, his face twitching uncontrollably, he had to hobble away in humiliation from the holy place.

III. ESKIMO FEASTS WITH FEATURES COMMON TO THE MITÂRTOQ CUSTOMS

It would be reasonable to regard these mitârtoq customs as a survival of an ancient Eskimo feast, and in fact this is how the present-day Greenlanders themselves see it. Costume games, and dances which either portray scenes from real life or are purely creatures of imagination are quite common among the Eskimos, either as elements in feasts of a cultic character or as entertainment pure and simple when time goes slowly. In this chapter I shall summarize the feasts that may at all be placed in association with the mitârtoq customs.

The asking festival in Alaska.

W. THALBITZER drew attention to the similarity of the mitârtoq practices with the asking festival, ai-ya'gûk, as celebrated around Norton Sound and Bering Strait every year towards the end of November, when the winter supplies had been got together (THALBITZER 1925, p. 247 and 1941, p. 664).

One evening the men and the bigger boys blackened their faces with soot and made patterns on their bodies, whereafter they walked in Indian file, each carrying a wooden bowl, from house to house, with a crowd of noisy children in their wake. At each place they held their bowls out, stamped their feet on the ground and made unintelligible sounds, their faces averted to prevent recognition, while the women filled their bowls with food. They were supposed to represent spirits being satisfied on receiving presents of food from the women. This however was merely the introduction to the actual feast which was held on the following day. To an intermediary, who wore miserable clothing, had blacked his face and in his hand carried an ai-ya'gûk, which means a stick with suspended rings, a man could say what he wanted of a particular woman. The woman then appeared with her wish and finally they met in the dance-house where gifts were being exchanged. If the woman was unmarried, the man had the right to sleep with her the following night. (HAWKES 1914, p. 22 and NELSON 1899, pp. 359—360).

The introductory scene to the asking festival might also be played as an independent celebration. PETROFF described one in the same region, held in honour of the spirits of the sea and of the land. After the men had painted themselves the women were called into the dance house. For a short while the room became laden with mysterious sounds, and then one by one the men put their heads up the hole where the fireplace is usually situated. They blew and puffed like seals. Some wore animal masks and

all writhed in fantastic contortions on the floor in their endeavours to frighten the women. The women, who already knew that the one way to avoid being molested was to give the spirits presents, quickly distributed the delicacies they had brought with them. These being eaten, the men acted a pantomime "of a highly grotesque character", whereafter they visited some of the houses and received gifts at each one. Finally there were singing and dancing in the dance house (PETROFF 1900, p. 218).

The uvâjêrtôq games in East Greenland.

From East Greenland we know of the so-called uvâjêrtôq games, in which both men and women might take part. Each had his or her own favourite role, usually a humoristic caricature of everyday types. They performed either dressed up or naked, though the women wore short trousers. Some wore masks, others were blackened with soot, and sometimes the faces were distorted by being bound up with thongs and by small pegs inserted in the mouth.

When the outside world first became acquainted with these games through the medium of GUSTAV HOLM's umiak expedition to Angmagssalik in 1884—85, they were devoid of cultic significance to the East Greenlanders, being regarded merely as a popular form of entertainment, usually in the houses in winter (HOLM 1914, p. 128, and THALBITZER 1923, pp. 291—311). Resorting to every means within their power the uvâjêrtut would try to work the inmates of the house into a state of ecstasy, but occasionally they succeeded only in terrifying the children, much to the delight of the grown-ups (JOHAN PETERSEN 1957, p. 19).

Among games which may have some connection with ancient cultic rites THALBITZER mentions *nacaarater* — "the woman with the little hood". A man with blackened face and disguised as a woman goes outside and covers his hair with snow, whereafter he comes in and collects gifts from those present. He then starts doing a drum-dance. A man pulls the drum out of his hand, he runs after him, beating him and the other spectators hard with his drumstick (THALBITZER 1923, p. 309 and 1941, p. 663 ff.).

Another uvâjêrtôq game: *miartorniaq* — "one who is after presents", also called *amâkajêq* — "the laughable child-carrier", is also reminiscent of some of the West Greenland *mitârtut*. A man is dressed up as a woman with a child, a stuffed doll, inside the *amaut*. Between his legs dangles a small tub, and a larger one is passed round among the spectators. He does a drum-dance, fondling his child now and then. The presents for the mother are put into the large tub, those for the child in the small one.

Should one of the onlookers have no presents to give he is regaled with some hefty blows by the uvâjêrtôq (ROSING 1957, p. 244 ff.).

Nalîkâteq — “the heavy-groined one”, is a variant of the myth of the entrail-snatcher. The face is smeared with soot and bound with thongs. The man is clad in stuffed ragged female clothing and between his legs hangs the skin of a dog’s head. Making use of a fantastic drum-dance he tries to get the spectators to laugh. “The dance gets wilder and wilder, the dog’s head “barks” at the spectators as if to encourage them to smile. “The hag” wriggles her body ingratiatingly and the song is replete with siren tones. “Mat’ta — mat’ta”, the words say. Suddenly an onlooker explodes in a roar of laughter and jumps up on to the platform and everything resolves into the sputtering of people vainly trying to stifle their mirth. “The hag” throws the drum to the floor and with one leap, giving a long-drawn howl, lands in the midst of a jumble of people convulsed with laughter. The drumstick, an extra-heavy piece of wood, hails down on the bent backs. The wild rush and bustle seethes through the house — “akâ-akâ-oh-oh” — sobbing and laughing in an all-consuming witches cauldron.” (ROSING 1957, p. 241 ff.).

The West Greenland catechist HANSÊRAK, who was a member of the umiak expedition, had already recognized the similarity of the uvâjêrtôq games with the mitârtoq customs. After describing the various costume games of the East Greenlanders in his diary he writes: “uvagut mitârtunik oqartaravta qavângarnitsat uvâjêrtunik oqartarput” — “we (i.e. the West Greenlanders) call them mitârtut, the East Greenlanders call them uvâjêrtut” (HANSÊRAK 1892, p. 124).

Costume games in Labrador.

At Nain, on the east coast of Labrador, FRANK G. SPECK collected particulars of disguises and masks and pointed out their similarity with for instance the mitârtoq customs in West Greenland. About Christmas time, in December and January, a man or a woman would dress up in old, ragged clothing, wear a skin mask and carry a stick as a walking support, and then go from house to house, followed by a gay crowd of spectators. His sole purpose was to amuse people with his curious gestures and laughable appearance, and in return he received small presents of tobacco and sweets.

On such occasions any of those present could contribute to the entertainment with a performance of some kind, and often they would all take part in games of various kinds. It was also the custom for the masquerader to be asked to sing, or, perhaps the other way round, the entire assembly sang at his prompting (SPECK 1935, pp. 160—63).

The Sedna feasts in Baffinland.

But it is especially among tribes of the Central Eskimos in Canada that feasts are held with some resemblance to the *mitârtoq* customs. Among the Baffinlanders we hear of the great feasts for Sedna, the goddess of the sea. They took place in the autumn, in November in a period when sealing was a dangerous and uncertain form of hunting because field ice was not yet properly formed.

In Cumberland Sound and Frobisher Bay the shamans held seances to drive the bad spirits away and in the end had to do battle with Sedna herself. A rope was coiled on the floor with a small opening at the top to represent a breathing hole in the ice. Two shamans stood ready with harpoons and a third sang in the background. Sedna was harpooned but escaped into the depths of the sea and the bloody harpoon head was exhibited.

Early next day the men ran shouting from house to house and at each place the housewife scattered small trifles — pieces of meat, fragments of skin or the like. Then there was a tug-of-war between teams of those born in winter and those born in summer. If the summer-born won there would be fine weather all that winter, it was said.

Later there was a ceremony, at which all filled their drinking bowls from a large pot, whereupon they spurted some drops of water on the ground and recited their name and place of birth. When all were finished, two gigantic figures appeared, *qailertetang* they were called. Their faces were concealed behind skin masks and their bodies were distended with many layers of clothing, both men's and women's. On their backs they each had an inflated harpoon-float and in the right hand carried a harpoon, in the left a skin scraper. Silent, and with much solemnity they arranged the men and the women in two separate rows and then brought them together in couples. Each couple then ran to the woman's house and for the following day were considered man and wife. The *qailertetang* went down to the sea and made magic there to conjure the favourable north wind. This mission completed, the men attacked the two *qailertetang* and pretended to kill them. The harpoon floats on their backs were cut to pieces and soon they lay "dead" beside their broken weapons. While the men went to fetch their drinking cups the *qailertetang* revived and then received a cup of water from each man, who simultaneously inquired about the future. The *qailertetang* mumbled an answer which the inquirer had to interpret as he best could (Boas 1888, pp. 603—06).

The whaler Captain Mutch also gave an account of the Sedna ceremonies in Cumberland Sound (Boas 1901, p. 140 ff.). On the whole it agrees with Boas's, except that in Mutch's version the three shamans themselves went down to Sedna and asked for good hunting and health.

At first she reproached them because the taboo rules had not been observed, but promised to let them have what they wanted if they undertook not to break taboo in future. The shamans then returned and announced that Sedna would soon be visiting them. She was then harpooned and people exchanged wives in order to make her disappear the quicker. The soul of one of the shamans followed her and stabbed her, afterwards displaying the bloody knife as a good omen. Only one qailertetang performed and was said to be Sedna's maid-servant. She was mute. It was said that she liked to see people happy and therefore a feast was given when she arrived. While it proceeded small presents were given, there was tug-of-war as well as the water ceremony and recitation of birth-place and time. Finally, the qailertetang paired off the men and women and each couple ran to the man's house. It was said, however, that it was not a real wife-exchange.

From Cumberland Sound Kumlien describes the ceremonial wife exchange, which also seems to have taken place independently of the Sedna feasts proper. The men and women arranged themselves in two opposite rows. A shaman with masked face and grotesquely clad took up a position between the rows and decided who were to form couples. The couples then retired to the women's house and the shaman himself took the last woman in the row (KUMLIEN 1879, p. 43).

BILBY wrote a long description of the Sedna ceremonies in Baffinland, conforming partly with the above account by BOAS. BILBY asserted that when the disguised shaman coupled the men and women off, it was partly prearranged: "The conjurers chose among the women for themselves first, and next for those hunters who have sufficient eye for beauty and sufficient of this world's goods to mention the fact privately and persuasively beforehand." (BILBY 1923, p. 210 ff.).

At Frobisher Bay the autumnal feast was celebrated in a rather different manner. Three masked persons appeared, representing the spirits ekko, ekkotow and noonagekshown. The first two were conducted into the dance-house, where ekko pretended to strike at people with a kayak scraper held in his hand. He drove the men and women out of the house pairwise. Noonagekshown carried a lance in his hand and a drag on his back, and his trunk and limbs were bound up with strips of skin. Like ekko, he brought health to the sick and good weather, that is to say abundant hunting spoils. He too distributed the women among the men. None of them spoke, but conveyed their meaning by signs. Finally, noonagekshown chased people away by butting with his tall, pointed cap (BOAS 1901, pp. 141—42).

C. F. HALL also mentions the Sedna feast among the Nugumiut on Frobisher Bay. He was not a personal witness of it but had it described by the Eskimos. It was held at our Christmas time. It included the

ceremony with the water when each person stated the place and time of his birth. They also threw presents to one other. Some days after this feast two men, one dressed as a woman, went from house to house blowing the lamps out; they were then relighted with new fire (HALL 1864, p. 528).

At Akuliak on the north side of Hudson Strait there were two ekko in the autumnal feast, a male and a female. Both wore their garments inside out and the man was in a tall hood with the point bound round with a thong to make it resemble a horn. Long strips of skin were attached to the shoulders and ran down the sides and in between the legs, where his long imitation penis was tied up. Ekko gave omens of hunting success and luck, and another of their roles was to seize people and make them confess their breaches of taboo. They never spoke but indicated by groaning that one of those present had infringed the rules. In the presence of the ekko no one must laugh; anyone who did so would soon die (BOAS 1907, p. 491).

At the autumnal feast among the Akudnirmiut at Hope Bay, likewise in Baffinland, two masked persons represented the male and the female respectively, mirquussang. They were masked and both had a skin scraper in one hand. Their left leg was tied up so that they could only move along by hopping. On trying to get into the houses, if they tripped over a thong held across the doorway they were struck with sticks or whips. On getting into the houses they blew the lights out.

Part of this feast included the exorcism of Sedna as in Cumberland Sound. The wife-exchanging ceremonies proceeded on the following night. The mirquussang sat down on the snow, the man with a knife in his hand, and sang while people assembled in the dance house. There they began dancing and singing, but later all the men had to go outside. The mirquussang stood at the doorway and then led the women out separately to one of the men. Each couple then had to go back into the dance house and walk round about the lamp while all the others cried: hrr! hrr! Then they proceeded to the woman's house where they remained the following night. This latter part of the feast was often celebrated apart from the great Sedna feast (BOAS 1888, pp. 608—09).

Feasts among the Iglulik Eskimos.

Concerning the Iglulik Eskimos KNUD RASMUSSEN describes a practice connected with the song feasts in the dance house. After all who wished to sing had been heard, two men proceeded to a nearby hut where one dressed himself up as a woman in clothing much too small and constricted at all the places that should otherwise be baggy, the result being a comical sight. In his hand he held a snow-beater. The other dressed up in

man's clothes which were also too small, and armed himself with a dog-whip; moreover he was equipped with a large penis, made either of wood or stuffed gut. Both *tivajût*, as they were called, wore skin masks. They were not supposed to speak and had to convey their commands by pantomime. Their first action was to chase all the men out with whip and snow-beater. They themselves followed, and then each of the male audience told which of the women he fancied for the coming night, whereupon the *tivajût* went inside again and touched the foot-soles of the first woman with whip and snow-beater. She went outside and returned with the man who wanted her. From then on they both had to keep a perfectly straight face, otherwise they would not live long, while all the other women did everything they could to make them laugh. To the accompaniment of a song the couple slowly and solemnly walked round and round. The *tivajût* stood facing each other, the man striking his large penis with his whip and the "woman" striking it too with her snow-beater; in the end they pretended to copulate. The game went on all the evening until all were paired off, and then each man took his chosen woman to his house (RASMUSSEN 1929, pp. 241—43).

THERKEL MATHIASSEN described this ceremony among the Iglulik Eskimos from an old man's account of masked dances which were held at the end of last century. A man danced together with his wife, he with a whip in his hand, she with a stick. Both wore masks of skin and sometimes the man would be equipped with an imitation penis which was tied to his upper body with a string, so it could be raised and lowered. When it was raised the spectators were allowed to laugh; when it was lowered they had to look grave. The two dancers were not supposed to laugh at all. The man then had to choose a woman for himself among the onlookers, and if a woman wished to be the one she could whisper his name, whereupon he touched her with the whip. They went outside together, his wife meanwhile threatening the spectators with the stick (MATHIASSEN 1928, pp. 227—28).

Netsilik Eskimo ceremony for the Sea Woman.

From the Arviligjuarmiut group of Netsilik Eskimos KAJ BIRKET-SMITH relates briefly that the people gathered for a ceremony in autumn and winter when hunting had been poor. On such occasions a man, masked but otherwise in ordinary clothes, would attempt to catch the others and touch them on the abdomen. He was not allowed to speak, but could blow a breath with a long ooh. Afterwards there was wife-exchanging. This was supposed to propitiate Nuliajuk, as the Sea Woman was called there, for they knew that such a ceremony pleased her greatly (BIRKET-SMITH 1945, p. 127).

Subjugation of the Sea Woman among the Central Eskimos and in Greenland.

The Netsilik Eskimos, however, were also familiar with a method of subjugating the Sea Spirit similar to that practised by the Baffinlanders. If a spell of bad hunting set in, a shaman would throw a long, hooked line into the entrance passage and haul the Sea Woman inside. She was not allowed to withdraw until she promised to set the seals at liberty. (RASMUSSEN 1931, p. 226).

Among the Copper Eskimos a large snow-hut was built out on the ice; a hole was then made through the ice to represent the breathing-hole through which the Sea Woman would come. After the people had sung a magic song the soul of the Sea Woman ascended and entered the shaman. He now acted for her, as her mouthpiece, and he told them that the bad hunting was the result of sins against the taboos. He gestured wildly about him and the men tried to hold him; but after all had confessed to having broken the taboos he calmed down and the Sea Woman returned home (RASMUSSEN 1932, p. 24 ff.). According to Jenness the shaman talked with the Sea Woman who was just under the ice (JENNESS 1922, p. 188).

Among the Iglulik Eskimos (RASMUSSEN 1929, p. 124 ff.), the Polar Eskimos (RASMUSSEN 1925, p. 31), in West Greenland (PAUL EGEDE 1788, p. 79 ff.) and in East Greenland (RASMUSSEN 1938, p. 82) the Sea Spirit was subjugated by the shaman himself in the way that he in the course of a seance undertook a dangerous journey to her abode in the sea. Now and then, however, this method was also employed by the Baffinlanders, the Netsilik and Copper Eskimos.

IV. MITÂRTOQ CUSTOMS COMPARED WITH CENTRAL ESKIMO AND EAST GREENLAND CEREMONIES

The disguised beings and their function.

The masked and dressed-up persons are an impressive feature of the ceremonies. There is scarcely any doubt that they are supposed to represent supernatural beings. This is most obvious among the Baffinlanders, where at the annual Sedna celebrations they brought good omens for the future: health, good weather and abundance of game, and also caused the people to confess breaking the taboos so that they might be purified in the eyes of Sedna. Moreover, they paired men and women off as an important rite of the cult.

The sexual aspect.

It also happened, as already mentioned, that there were ceremonies apart from the autumnal celebration in Baffinland, when the entire substance of the event was wife-exchanging with the disguised persons as intermediaries between men and women.

Similar wife-exchanging ceremonies were held among the Netsilik and Iglulik Eskimos. Among the latter the cultic character had retired into the background and the whole affair was more in the form of a game, but one of great social significance all the same. KNUD RASMUSSEN's description of how all the men had to leave the festival house, whereupon the women one by one were conducted outside by *tivajôq*, is highly reminiscent of the termination of the autumnal celebration among the Akudnirmiut. According to THERKEL MATHIASSEN, however, there was no pairing of the men and women present; the male *tivajôq* alone had the privilege of choosing a woman for himself.

In Labrador, where the Moravian mission has been working since 1771, a strict and effectual policy has been pursued of stamping out everything likely in any way to offend the missionaries' reading of the teaching and morals of Christianity. As a consequence, there is nothing sexual or cultic about the masquerade customs known today; they are merely innocent fun, providing an occasion for an evening's amusement.

In West Greenland too the cultic background of the *mitârtut* has quite disappeared; but the erotic character is still preserved, though in more subdued form. On the other hand, BERTELSEN's account from North Greenland agrees closely with KNUD RASMUSSEN's of the Iglulik Eskimos, where the performing couple give an imitation of the sexual act. It is possible that in Greenland too this was once the overture to wife-exchanging among those present at the ceremony. Nowadays the *mitârtut* alone in appearance and conduct emphasize the sexual aspect of the proceedings.

The fact that wife-exchanging was once common in Greenland, not merely between two couples who made a temporary exchange of partners, but also among the adult population of a settlement for a single evening, is related *inter alia* in the aforesaid report by HANS EGEDE. But what Hans Egede and many later missionaries failed to understand, but was recognized by one of them alone, H. C. GLAHN, was that this form of wife-exchanging might have a religious background. He related that the Greenlanders considered their lamp-extinguishing game, during which the men had sexual intercourse with the women sitting nearest, to be a sort of sacred act whereby they thought they could avert some imminent disaster (GLAHN 1771, pp. 322—23 and 275—76).

It is said of the people of East Greenland (HOLM 1914, p. 69, and HANSÊRAK 1933, pp. 69 and 107), that the lamp-extinguishing game took place in the houses in winter on festive occasions. Sometime it formed the conclusion of an evening when the shaman had held a seance; in other instances it seems to have been a sort of party game, played when guests were being entertained. There is no record that it was associated with the uvâjêrtôq games, but of course it is possible that the feast was sometimes continued in that manner.

Ceremonial wife-exchanging served to strengthen fellowship, especially in a situation that was critical for the community. It might actually be a religious and social obligation to take part. Among the Central Eskimos it was said that the Sea Spirit was so pleased by it that she expressed her thanks by releasing the animals of the hunt. At the same time the erotic feature must be regarded as an expression of the undisguised pleasure and interest which the Eskimos take in sexual life.

Subjugation of the Sea Mother and the Spirits.

The hope was also entertained of releasing the animals by direct subjugation of the Sea Mother; that would ensure abundant game. Among the Baffinlanders the men also "killed" the spirits, but they subsequently came to life again of their own accord.

Greenland has only one solitary record capable of being interpreted as a reminiscence of a ritual homicide, whereby life was renewed, as it were. This is the report that in South Greenland it was formerly the practice for a mitârtôq to be stabbed and killed by another mitârtôq and then revived by a third. There the mitârtut had assumed all the roles themselves.

Receiving presents.

The mitârtut have another role; among the Baffinlanders it is the men who play it. This is their round of the houses, where they receive various small presents, generally of the edible kind. In Labrador too it is the dressed-up persons who receive presents.

Appearance and outfit of the spirits.

Among the Baffinlanders, the Iglulik and Netsilik Eskimos the masked and costumed persons performed alone or two or three together. From Labrador and Greenland there is no mention of limit to their number; anybody might dress up, for no-one took them really seriously. But at any rate at Fiskenæsset the various mitârtut acted quite independently.

In Cumberland Sound the qailertetang's costume showed that he represented both man and woman. From the Akuliak, Hope Bay, and the Iglulik Eskimos we heard of a man and a woman, or a man disguised as a woman, and the performers mentioned by BERTELSEN from North Greenland were also dressed up as man and woman. Otherwise mitârtut are generally male, or girls dressed as males.

Everywhere the costumes were of the same grotesque character — ragged clothing that was too large or too small, several garments one over the other, put on back-side foremost or inside out. Only few of the dressed-up figures among the Baffinlanders wore a more special disguise. The male ekko, the male tivajôq and most of the mitârtut were equipped with a penis of wood, skin or gut. Their faces were either blackened with soot or concealed with a mask, usually of skin.

In their hands they carried implements symbolical of the male or the female. Qailertetang had both the male and the female attributes, a harpoon and a skin scraper. Ekko and noonagekshown had a kayak scraper and a spear respectively, both of which are male attributes. Each of the two mirquussang carried a skin scraper, but for the final ceremony the male mirquussang held a knife in his hand. The male tivajôq had a short dog-whip, the female a snow-beater or a stick, the latter probably functionally equivalent to the snow-beater. In Labrador and Greenland too the masqueraders carried a stick, and the equipment of most mitârtut also included a soot-smeared bird wing; they used the stick and wing for striking at people, and ekko and tivajût put their attributes to the same use.

If these disguised and masked persons were taken seriously their apparition could not but be frightening; if not, the comical element was the more outstanding. But not infrequently the terrifying and the ludicrous elements were present simultaneously.

Silence versus laughter.

A characteristic feature of all these dressed-up persons was their consistently silent behaviour. The mirquussang alone had a magic song, it is related. Whether or not the taboo against laughing also applied to the onlookers most reports omit to state. At Akuliak it was considered such a grave sin to laugh in the presence of the spirits that, it was said, anyone doing so would die soon afterwards. According to BILBY, the spectators were merry and gay, but the various couples, when their turn came to withdraw, had to observe the most profound gravity if they wished to escape being inflicted with a serious illness.

Among the Iglulik Eskimos, where the respect for the disguised beings was much less than among the Baffinlanders, the prohibition again applied only to the selected couple, according to one report; it was said that their

life would be short if they failed to abide by it. In the other report it seems that the onlookers' efforts first to be serious and then to laugh were merely part of the fun.

In Labrador there was no rule about not laughing or talking for either performers or onlookers; in fact, the masqueraders might sometimes sing, urged by the others.

In Greenland too the spectators are under no restrictions as to laughing, but the rule does apply to the *mitârtut* and the audience do all they can to make them break the rule. As in Labrador, all respect for the spirits is gone; now-a-days they are regarded as comics, even if a brief feeling of fear may set in, to be quickly displaced by laughter.

The conflict between the urge to laugh at the ludicrous and the fear that something terrible will happen if one does, is in fact embodied in the ancient myth of the entrail-snatcher. That being is usually represented as a woman, although among the Polar Eskimos it is a man. By her baroque dancing and grotesque appearance she tries to induce the Moon's guests to laugh, and if she succeeds she slits their bellies and removes their bowels (see i.a. THALBITZER 1926, p. 70 ff.).

In appearance the entrail-snatcher is something like a *mitârtoq*: the face, say the Iglulik Eskimos (RASMUSSEN 1929, p. 76) is comically tattooed, or it is distorted with protruberant eyes and upturned nose, as the Polar Eskimos say (RASMUSSEN 1925, p. 51), effects that are obtained by the *mitârtut* by means of soot and thong bindings respectively. Among the East Greenlanders it is told that the entrail-snatcher wears nothing but a body belt, but that a dog's head dangles in the crutch (RASMUSSEN 1921, p. 88) (cp. the fantastic phallus representations of the *mitârtut*). According to the Iglulik Eskimos she wears a jacket that is much too short for her (RASMUSSEN 1929, p. 76); the *mitârtut* are also fond of misfitting clothing.

As was said above, there is a true copy of the entrail-snatcher in the *uvâjêrtoq* games in East Greenland.

Notwithstanding these points of resemblance, however, it would probably be best not to assume any close, inward connection between the entrail-snatcher and the cult of the Sea Woman. They are parts of two separate traditions, the former being intimately associated with the Moon and having no place in the traditions concerning the Sea Woman.

As a matter of fact, trying to keep a straight face when something humorous or laughable is going on is a common Eskimo game (BIRKET-SMITH 1924, p. 419). Moreover it plays a large part in the inviting-in feast described by Hawkes from Norton Sound in Alaska (HAWKES 1913, p. 12): by means of comical dances and performances the hosts do all they can to make their guests laugh; anyone losing control and laughing must pay whatever forfeit the hosts demand.

Seasons for ceremonies.

All the foregoing ceremonies and feasts take place in winter, the normal Eskimo festival season. In these months they live together in larger groups and have a greater opportunity of strengthening their social solidarity by these gatherings than in summer, when the families usually are scattered about.

Sometimes they assemble for a feast on large accumulated stores of food; at other times there is a scarcity, which is a particularly grave situation in winter, for no-one can endure both hunger and cold very long. So there is all the more reason for cultic ceremonies in that season. Among the Central and Eastern Eskimos they try both to intimidate and to please the Sea Woman so much that she will see to it that hunting is good again. The Baffinlanders hold the big Sedna ceremony in November. But on the whole it seems that the Sea Woman can be contacted whenever it is necessary, not merely on one particular occasion in the year.

There is another important factor in this preference for winter as the festive season: in the cold, dark period when the greater part of the day is spent indoors, the mind is greatly in need of the change and relaxation obtainable from a social gathering.

According to HALL's account from Frobisher Bay, the Sedna ceremonies were connected with a mid-winter feast, where they symbolically celebrated the lengthening of the days by extinguishing the old fire and igniting a new one. Turner makes the brief remark that the Eskimos of Ungava Bay also had "festivals and dances commemorative of the return of the sun from the south". (TURNER 1887, p. 755). Otherwise solstitial ceremonies seem to have been unknown among the Eskimos¹) and there is reason to believe that these accounts are due to a misunderstanding; it may have some connection with what was said about the Sedna ceremony among the Akudnirmiut, that the mirqussang blew the lamps out when they came into the houses. Most shaman seances used to be held in darkness, with the lamps extinguished.

The mitártuq customs in Greenland, on the other hand, are associated with certain Christian feast-days; but the problem which this involves will be dealt with later.

Mitártuq customs, a remnant of the Sea Woman cult.

In their present-day form the mitártuq customs seem to represent a faint reflection of the cultic ceremonies in honour of the Sea Woman. The whole community no longer joins in; the people are amused but are merely

¹) It is true that CRANZ states that in North Greenland the people celebrated the ending of the dark period on the day when the sun again appeared in the sky (CRANZ 1770, I, p. 229), but this is denied by GLAHN, who must be regarded as the higher authority in this field (GLAHN 1771, p. 271).

passive onlookers, and the functions which may have been theirs in former times have now been assumed by the *mitârtut* themselves. The ancient Eskimo religious background has now faded entirely and the behaviour of the *mitârtut* is regarded merely as elements in youthful games reminiscent of ancient traditions; indeed at some places it has become a children's game, and at some others *mitârtut* have fallen so low in the people's estimation that their performance is regarded as begging in disguise.

Connection of *uvâjêrtoq* games with cultic ceremonies.

The *uvâjêrtoq* games in East Greenland may also be considered as vestiges of cultic ceremonies (THALBITZER 1925, p. 247 and 1941, p. 663 ff.). Three examples have already been given in which the similarity to the *mitârtut* seems to be great; but there are many other *uvâjêrtoq* roles which cannot all have their roots in an old tradition of cultic character. In East Greenland, where developments on many points have differed from what has happened in West Greenland, quite a number of persistent *uvâjêrtoq* figures have emerged, all played very humorously and ironically.

The fact may be worth while emphasizing that a festive atmosphere is apt to find expression in amusing ideas of many kinds, even on cultic occasions. It may be an incidental detail, or it may be so well received that it is repeated on the next occasion, and so contribute towards creating a special elaboration of the cult.

All the same, the principal variations are chiefly ascribable to certain shamans, whose forceful personalities have enabled them to establish new ideas. The Sedna ceremonies as observed by the Baffinlanders are an example of how many lesser ceremonies can be associated.

V. COMPARISON BETWEEN THE ASKING FESTIVAL AND THE FEASTS FOR THE SEA WOMAN

So far I have kept the asking festival of Alaska separate from the comparison with the Sedna complex. Apparently there are quite a number of similarities. In both regions the sooty, dressed-up or undressed figures represent spirits. But there is this important difference that in the East individual spirits are in action vis-à-vis the community as a whole, whereas in the West all the men act in concert against women and children. It is imaginable that this is an offshoot of the traces of secret societies observed in South Alaska and reported on particularly by MARGARET LANTIS (LANTIS 1947, p. 33).

The purpose of the Sedna ceremonies and the initial phase of the asking festival is to establish good relations with the supernatural powers; but the situation at the time of these events is not the same: in Canada and Greenland the ceremony is held at a time when hunting has failed and starvation is threatening unless the Sea Woman can be induced to release the game animals. In Alaska, on the other hand, it is the first feast to be held when the supplies for the forthcoming winter have been got together.

Presents are given to the spirits in Alaska in order, as it is said, to satisfy them: a form of offering, whereas in Canada the presents are given to people. This is a form of imitative magic for the purpose of ensuring the future abundance of game with the subsequent sharing out. The explanation of the giving of presents to masquerading persons in Labrador and Greenland may be the secularization sustained by the cult. Actually they are being paid for their performance. In Greenland, however, there is the additional element that by giving presents one can avoid physical injury, as described from Alaska.

In both Canada and Alaska a disguised figure is the intermediary between man and woman. In Canada this is a very important principle in the cult; all the adults of the community must participate and a man does not decide for himself whom he will have (not officially, at any rate). In Alaska the men themselves choose the gift-partner they want and the man may sleep with the woman only if she is unmarried. The significant aspect of the ceremony seems to be the exchange of gifts, or rather the bartering act.

However, notwithstanding the present functional differences we must probably assume that there is some historical connection between the asking festival in Alaska and the ceremonies for the Sea Woman among the Central and Eastern Eskimos. Possibly they are both rooted in an ancient cult of the sea divinities.

VI. MITÂRTOQ CUSTOMS COMPARED WITH SCANDINAVIAN CHRISTMAS AND TWELFTH NIGHT CUSTOMS

How shall we explain the exact dating of the mitârtôq figures in Greenland to Twelfth Night, or in other cases to New Year's Eve or to Shrovetide? One possible explanation is that in the course of time the Greenlanders have gradually confined their masquerades to the times when similar European events took place; for on examining the ancient

Scandinavian customs associated with the termination of the Christmas period we find many points of similarity to the *mitârtoq* customs.

From early times in Denmark there was a Epiphany custom of symbolical expulsion of Yuletide. Young people went about from farm to farm in grotesque disguises, their faces either masked or blackened with soot, and with a broom in their hands they swept and drove Christmas out of the rooms (OLRIK & ELLEKILDE 1951, pp. 1086—90). If we transfer this picture to Greenland the broom there is in the form of a bird's wing, which is still the usual form of sweeping brush in many parts of that country.

The Christian Yuletide embodied several reminiscences of pagan days, for example the Christmas goat. At times a number of people dressed themselves up, men in women's clothing and vice versa, and blackened their faces with soot, but as a rule they were content with a single Christmas goat, dressed in skin and straw, with its retinue. The object of the goat, like that of the *mitârtoq*, was to amuse and frighten at the same time. As a tradition handed down from the old pagan days it was regarded as a laughable figure, but with something sinister about it. The *mitârtut* were considered by the Greenlanders to be non-Christian, as witness the scene at Fiskenæsset where a *mitârtoq* was incapable of approaching the church; this attitude agrees with the conception of the Christmas goat, which was more or less clearly felt to be connected with the devil. There are several Danish descriptions of how the devil made his appearance in the train of the goat (l. c., p. 952 ff.).

Occasionally there was a sacrificial ceremony in connection with the Christmas goat, a ceremony which may be rather reminiscent of the *mitârtoq* killing in South Greenland. From Vestergötland comes the tale of a Christmas pig being offered up. A farm-hand, disguised as a woman and with his face blackened, slaughters the Christmas pig which is represented by a man sitting on a chair and dressed up in skin and straw. Later it is revived and in the subsequent dance the "woman" takes the part of the victim's wife, exactly as in BERTELSEN's narrative from North Greenland (l. c., p. 1082).

The Danish Epiphany pageants are also similar on certain points to the *mitârtoq* customs and may have been the cause of the latter's dating to the period round about Twelfth Night. In a few instances in fact the Epiphany pageants seem to have been imitated by the Greenlanders.

A Danish Epiphany custom transplanted to Greenland.

The particulars given in the foregoing (p. 8) regarding the beggars' feast differ considerably from what we know of the *mitârtoq* customs, even though the performers are named in the same way. The awe-inspiring, comically entertaining and erotic features are gone. Selection by means

of a guessing game is not known elsewhere, and in this instance the generally mute performance of the mitârtut is replaced by the singing of a short verse. Whereas the acceptance of gifts is merely a side issue to the real mitârtut, at the beggars' feast it is the very purpose of the ceremony.

It is not possible to connect this with any Eskimo feast, but there is a parallel to it in Danish Epiphany customs.

The dramatic Epiphany play in Denmark, with many biblical characters, seems to have disappeared so long ago as in the middle of the 18th century (CELANDER 1950, p. 35). On the other hand, the tradition of the Magi was maintained: three men or boys wearing a shirt outside their clothing and a conical cap on their heads, went about with a representation of a star and sang Twelfth Night songs or hymns. One of them was blackened with soot, because one of the Magi was black. In return for their songs they were given food and drink, and they often took the food home. They also carried a collecting box for money.

At times it was an old man or a married couple that went about singing. It might also happen that a whole flock of children or young people ran about with staves in their hands, the girls in boys' clothes and the boys in girls' clothes; they were apt to sing a merrier song and to dance.

These celebrations usually took place on Twelfth Night or Twelfth Day, continuing perhaps during the following days; but there are also records of their occurring during Christmas itself or between New Year and Twelfth Night.

As time went on it was forbidden at some places to go about singing and carrying a star, this being regarded as a cloak for begging; round about the year 1900 the custom seems to have disappeared at most places in Denmark, though here and there it is still observed to this day (SCHMIDT 1948, p. 50 ff.).

It is probable that these Twelfth Night pageants were also held among Europeans at several places in Greenland in the 18th and 19th centuries, and that they were then imitated by the Greenlanders. They would scarcely understand the context of the song; they saw merely that the thing to do was to dress up and go from house to house singing, receiving presents in return. In the Greenland version there is no mention of a star, but as a matter of fact it was also lacking sometimes in Denmark.

However, because of their resemblance to the mitârtut proper, those taking part in Twelfth Night celebrations have been given the same name. And it is quite probable that the Greenlanders were not wholly aware that they were two different customs with totally different backgrounds.

The mitârtoq customs and the Danish New Year and Shrovetide celebrations.

At some places mitârtut go into action on New Year's Eve. It is also recorded a few times that the mitârtoq customs belong to Shrovetide, though in most places the Greenlanders deny most emphatically that the mitârtut have any connection with that feast. For instance, at Fiske-næsset the masks, disguises and performances are not the same on the two occasions. At Shrovetide they either wear masks bought at the store, or they make up with soot and lipstick. The disguise is usually composed of female clothing, and the masqueraders make no attempt whatever to appear grave and silent — on the contrary.

The reason why the mitârtoq customs at some places are now observed on New Year's Eve or at Shrovetide, may be that gradually as the Danish residents in Greenland dropped the masquerades connected with Twelfth Night, the Greenlanders in some places moved their feasts to the occasions when the Danes still masked and disguised themselves.

Concluding remarks.

Early on in this article mention is made of the highly remarkable fact that the mitârtoq customs were never described in the literature prior to the present century. It would be strange if these performances had completely escaped the attention of all those who were engaged in accumulating material concerning the original faith and customs of the Greenlanders. Perhaps the explanation is that they thought these customs had been brought to Greenland by their own countrymen, for they were familiar with similar customs at home. It was only when the various Twelfth Night customs had become much less common in Denmark that the mitârtut were regarded as something particularly Eskimo in character and calling for a description.

This similarity may also have been the reason why the early missionaries failed to eradicate the mitârtoq customs, because they were simply unaware that they were expressions of the Eskimo religion.

For the first Greenlanders to be baptized in the 18th century, who must often have been unable to distinguish between what they could or could not do as Christians, the mitârtoq customs must then have acquired a sort of legal stamp because the Europeans had similar customs. It is difficult to say how long the ancient cultic context was preserved up in time; nowadays at any rate nothing but the external scenery remains.

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