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**“Death in traditional East Greenland :
Age, causes, and rituals.
A contribution from anthropology
to archeology.”**

Collection “Peuples Autochtones“

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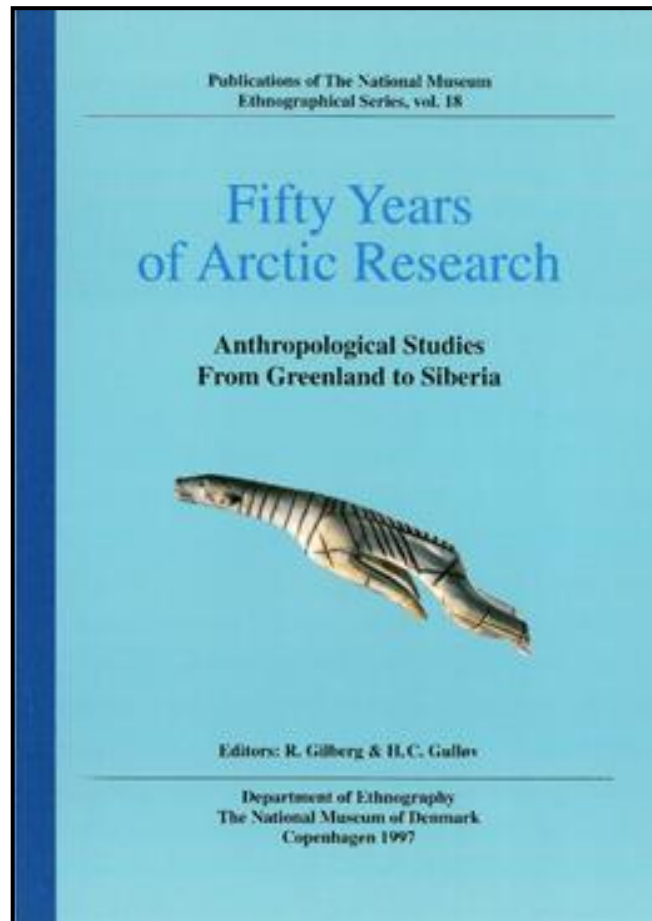
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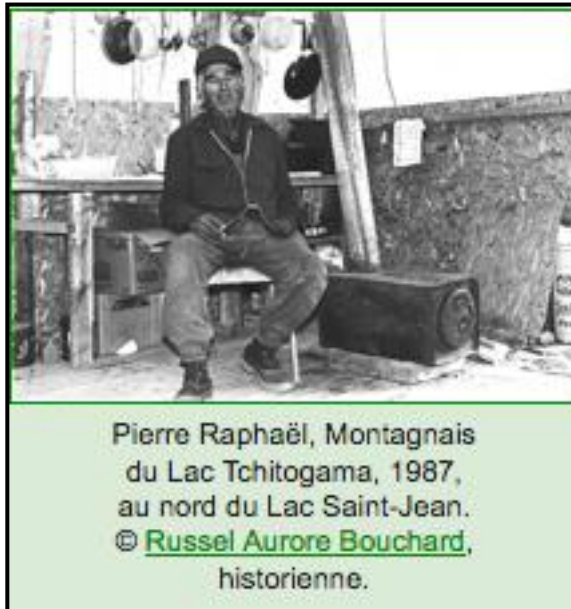
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par

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Table des matières

[Introduction](#) [261]

Data sources [261]

Age at death [262]

Infant mortality [262]

Child mortality [262]

Adult mortality [262]

Elderly mortality [262]

Causes of death according to sex [263]

Male mortality [263]

Female mortality [265]

Other causes of death [265]

Forms of burial [266]

Glossary [267]

Notes [267]

[References](#) [268]

Note pour la version numérique : La numérotation entre crochets [] correspond à la pagination, en début de page, de l'édition d'origine numérisée. JMT.

Par exemple, [1] correspond au début de la page 1 de l'édition papier numérisée.

[261]

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Introduction

[Retour à la table des matières](#)

In the Arctic areas, and especially in East Greenland where the population came into contact with Westerners at a very late date ¹, anthropological research and analysis, resulting from the reconstruction of ancient society by historical demography, can provide some answers to the questions asked by prehistorians and archaeologists, such as : What were the causes of death in nomadic hunting and gathering societies ? At what age ? What were the differences of the mortality rate between men and women ?

Excavating burial sites can provide some explanations, but all deaths without ground burial escape our knowledge, although the dead, who did not leave visible traces, could have been numerous. At the end of the 19th century, for example, burial at sea was preferred because it

¹ 1884 : Discovery of the Ammassalimmiut ethnic group by the Dane Gustav Holm ; 1894 : Beginning of the Danish colonization.

gave the dead easier access to the best of the Worlds of the Dead. The body, tied in a leather shroud, was placed on the shore or slipped through the ice to disappear for ever into the sea. To this kind of burial organised by the family of the deceased may be added : Those lost at sea while hunting or travelling in umiaqs, persons who committed suicide by throwing themselves in the sea, individuals who had been murdered and whose body was ritually dismembered with the different parts being dispersed in different areas so they could not reappear to take revenge, as well as those who died from hunger and were abandoned without burial, or those the living had to eat in order to survive.

In this presentation I would like to survey our actual knowledge of mortality in Ammassalik during the period preceding contact with the West, and during the early stages of Western presence in the area, spanning the period covering the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries.

Data sources

Historical and demographic data are numerous for the population of Ammassalik. They start with the first nominative list established in 1884-1885 by Johannes Hansen (Hansêrak) who accompanied Holm, followed by that of 1892 established by Ryder during a short visit to the area, and by nominative censuses established almost yearly ² by the first colonisers in charge of the local commercial organisation and the evangelization of the Ammassalimmiut. To these documents may be added vital registration data inscribed in parish registers since 1899, archive documents ³, observations by the first Danish visitors or by scientists having spent some time in the area (Holm, Hanserak, Petersen, Thalbitzer, Rasmussen, Mikkelsen), and all the demographic and genealogical field research realized by the physician and anthropologist Robert Gessain in 1934-1935 and 1936, research

² The years 1895-1899, 1901-1907, 1911, 1921, 1930.

³ Particularly those of the administrator Hedegaard for the years 1895-1929. (Archives of the Arktisk Institut).

completed by the ethnographical data collected by Paul-Emile Victor in 1934-1937.

Pursuing the research started by Robert Gessain, all the above information has been collated, cross checked and dated with maximum precision in order to reconstitute the genealogies of the whole Ammassalimmiut ethnic group. In addition, it was checked again at a later stage, whenever possible, between 1960 and 1990 with [262] the eldest East Greenlanders (See Robert-Lamblin 1986 : 16-18). However, some unavoidable imprecisions, errors, or omissions still remain, given the difficulty of identifying certain individuals whose name changed from one census to another, and the impossibility of obtaining exact information on infant mortality, or on certain birth and death dates for the period preceding 1915.

Age at death

Pre-contact Ammassalimmiut society is characterised by the low life expectancy of its members, inferior to 40 years for both sexes and lower for men than for women. Few individuals lived to or beyond 55 years : Only 4% in the census established at the discovery of this population in 1884 ⁴.

In the extremely harsh environment of East Greenland, the main periods of risk for death were at birth and during the first days of life, and later, during the full activities of adulthood, that is to say, between 17-20 years and 45-50 years, the period when men spend most of their time hunting and women give birth to children.

⁴ Ages were estimated by J. Hansen (Hansêrak) from historical landmarks (Holm 1911 : 188) and corrected in our data according to information obtained later.

Infant mortality

Prior to any kind of Western medical aid, one of the principal causes of death was infant mortality ⁵, and more particularly that of newborns. In traditional Ammassalimmiut society there were no midwives as such. Women gave birth alone or were helped by an old woman of the family.

The lack of hygiene for the mother as well as for the child during childbirth generated a high rate of mortality for both. Thus, on average, only three or four infants survived out of eight or nine deliveries per woman.

The presence of Greenlandic midwives trained in West Greenland or in Denmark (one in 1906, two in 1910, and three in 1923) lowered perinatal mortality at the beginning of the 20th century ⁶. Figure 1 shows the evolution of infant mortality over three decades 1897-1926 ; for the previous period, we do not have sufficiently complete and precise information. Infant deaths occurred essentially during the first week of life, and more specifically at birth or during the hours immediately following (Fig. 1).

Newborn infanticide was carried out only in very particular cases : Either the child was malformed, handicapped, weak at birth, or was the result of a forbidden union, such as incest or illegitimacy. In other cases the child's close family or whole family group might have undergone a serious crisis such as famine, want, demise of the father or death of the mother at birth, and all new mouths to feed would represent an unbearable burden. The infant, particularly in the case of a girl, would be abandoned in the cold, thrown into the sea or buried alive (with his or her deceased mother).

⁵ Infant mortality represents more than 30% of the total deaths recorded in 1897-1916 (Robert-Lamblin 1986 : 39).

⁶ A Danish nurse was then present in the area from 1932, and, in 1944, a permanent Danish doctor was appointed.

Years	Infant mortality rate for 1000 births	% of deaths at birth or during the first days of life
1897-1901	284	55
1902-1906	225	64
1907-1911	143	35
1912-1916	128	47
1917-1921	123	24
1922-1926	146	60

Fig. 1 - Infant mortality among the Ammassalimmiut population during the years 1897-1926. Number of births for the period : 809 ; total number of deaths : 466 ; number of infant deaths (0-1 year) : 137.

Child mortality

Beyond the first months of life, children had a good chance of survival into adulthood. Deaths occurring during childhood were essentially accidental : Falls, drowning while playing, dog bites. But children were always under the menace of tragic events touching their family group ; when their fathers died or there was a famine in the area, they were the first to die of hunger or made to commit suicide with their mother. Several accounts collected in East Greenland mention these mothers, who, having lost their economic support, threw themselves into the icy ocean with their young children.

Adult mortality

Adults were exposed to multiple risks - men, in particular, during their hunting activities, women during childbirth. The dangers of the environment were not the only causes of death for adult men ; homicides were also a frequent cause of death before colonization.

Elderly mortality

When we add to the above, various diseases and the famines which heavily affected the group at the end of the 19th century causing the death of whole families, it appears that dying of old age (over 55 years) was a very rare phenomenon in this population.

In Ammassalik, the suicide of the elderly, often mentioned among traditional Eskimo populations, resulted either from a personal decision, the person having decided to cut short his or her physical or moral sufferings, or from a real social pressure, for example, if the community was threatened by scarcity of food. Whatever the motive, personal or collective, the close kin of the person frequently helped him or her to carry out this act to its very end : to throw oneself from a cliff or disappear in a kayak (Holm 1911 : 147).

[263]

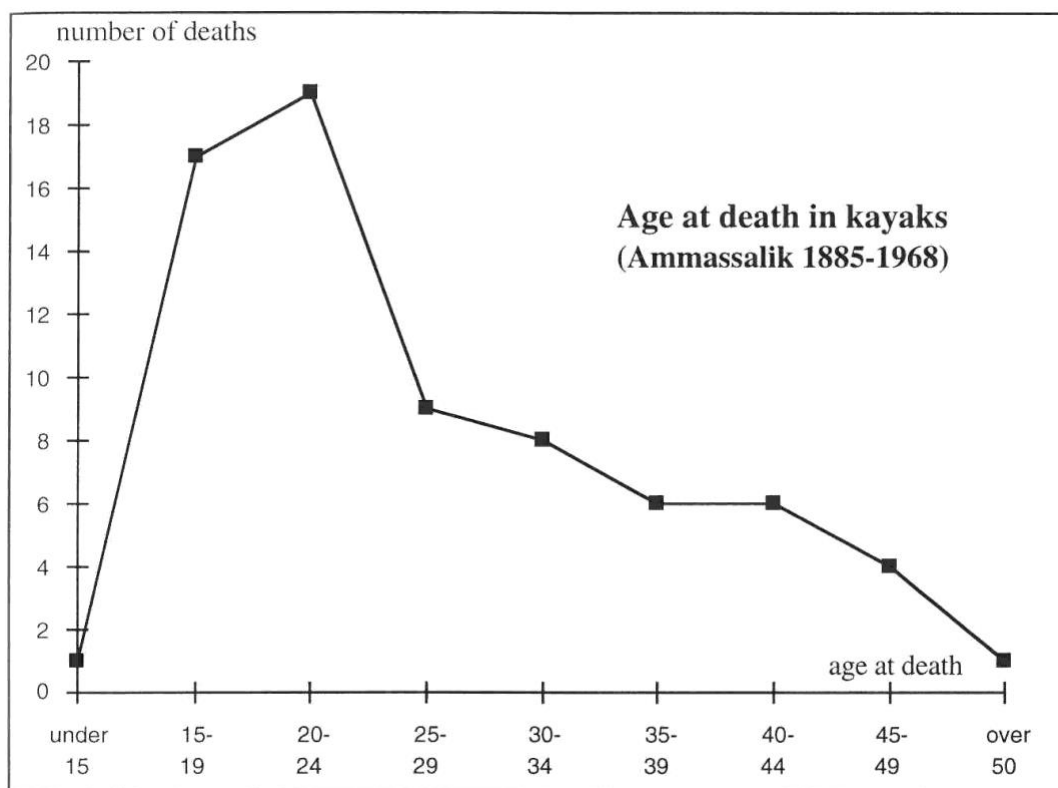


Fig. 2 : Age at death of hunters who died in kayaks, in Ammassalik, for the period 1885-1968. (N=71 cases : 70 men and 1 women. We can note that among these deaths, 7 were accounted for as murders and 1 as suicide, and that the last known case dates back to 1968).

Causes of death according to sex

From the analysis of the causes of death, it appears that the types of mortality vary for each sex. This difference is first of all linked to environment and to the division of activities between men and women, but also to the social organisation of the group.

Male mortality

The adult male population is particularly exposed to the dangers of the polar environment : Icebergs overturning, storms, avalanches, ice breaking under the weight of the sled, or the hunter on foot. It was hunting - upon which in the past the whole group depended for its survival -which forced the men to go out in search of game, whatever the weather or the season.

In traditional East Greenlandic society, kayak accidents were the most frequent causes of death among men. Bad weather could catch up with the hunter, he could lose his balance when throwing the harpoon, or he could be carried away by the harpoon's line, or even attacked by a walrus and have his kayak overturned. However, not all deaths occurring in kayaks were hunting accidents ; there were also murders, perpetrated while the victim was in the kayak. In at least seven of the cases (Fig. 2), the two causes of death, kayak and homicide, overlap ⁷. Another case is a kayak suicide (in 1913).

Fig. 2 shows the high frequency of deaths in kayaks among hunters aged 15 to 24 years : 51% of all deaths in a kayak concern these age groups. We should note here that there is a woman among the hunters who died in a kayak. She was born in 1918 and died in 1950, while hunting : She is an example of the rare cases of gender role inversion. On this subject Holm mentions two women hunters possessing a kayak, whom he met south of Ammassalik in 1884 (Holm 1911 : 187).

Returning to cases of homicide, their number appears to be very high considering the small size of the population (Fig. 3) and the tragedy represented by the death of any hunter, brutally depriving his family of its economic support ⁸. These murderous acts originated in

⁷ These deaths occurred in 1890, 1895, 1896, 1906, 1926, 1933 and 1935.

⁸ In 1884, a hunter had to feed an average of 4 to 5 persons.

[264]

Year of the census	Ammassalimmiut population Total (M number, W number)	Number of persons aged 15-54 years	Sex ratio at 15-54 years
1884	413 (M 193 ; W 220)	M 109 ; W 121	90
1892	293 (M 131 ; W 162)	M 72 ; W 91	79
1901	429 (M 204 ; W 225)	M 103 ; W 140	74
1911	547 (M 252 ; W 295)	M 123 ; W 152	81
1921	655 (M 313 ; W 342)	M 156 ; W 174	90

Fig. 3 : Sex ratio in the age group between 15 and 54 years, for the Ammassalik population, according to various censuses. M = male ; W = women.

rivalries between hunters or shamans, jealousy over women, and even the obligation for a man to revenge a member of his family who had been murdered (Rasmussen in Ostermann 1938 :85-89). The vendetta type of family revenge, a murder for a murder, was the cause of a high number of deaths in the 19th century. Sometimes a man murdered another man simply because he suspected him of having bad intentions towards him. He thus anticipated a supposed malevolent action, at the same time exposing himself to the risks of retaliation from the deceased's family. Most often, the murderer, helped by one or two accomplices, killed his victim by throwing a harpoon in his back while he was hunting in his kayak. Sometimes, the killing took place on land, with a knife. The famous execution of Ilisimartek, who had murdered four men between 1886 and 1890, happened in 1892, using one of the very first guns introduced in the area. According to the information collected, there were 14 murders perpetrated on men between 1886 and 1896. Four of the victims were shamans (Uvia, Apalito, Kajamat, Simujok) who had themselves taken part in other murders, or were suspected of having stolen the soul of a person, causing his or her death.

A ritual was used to neutralize the power of a powerful enemy : his body was rapidly cut up at the joints and the head, eyes, and limbs were dispersed in different locations. The person would then be unable to reassemble himself as a whole being to come back and take revenge on the living (Victor & Robert-Lamblin 1993 : 28 + 287-288).

Female mortality

An important cause of death among women was childbirth and the period immediately following. We have already mentioned the very precarious conditions of childbirth in this traditional society, and the absence of specialized midwives, as well as the application of certain customs to facilitate delivery ⁹.

A certain number of mothers died of post natal haemorrhage or puerperal fever. For the 1897-1926 period (Fig. 1), I found 25 cases of women having died in childbirth or of its consequences ; all of which, crossed with the 809 births registered during that period, gives us the very high figure of 3.1% of women dying while giving birth ¹⁰. For seven of these, it was their first child. At death, the age of these women is distributed among the following age groups : 15-19 years : 2 women ; 20-24 years : 5\$; 25-29 years : 69 ; 30-34 years : 69 ; 35-39 years : 49 ; 40-44 years : 29. The fate of children born thus was mostly that of their mother. Either they were born dead or died at birth, or they were buried alive with the mother, or were thrown into the sea, since in most cases there was no milk to feed them (the only available milk for infants, before Danish colonization, was women's milk). If, however, another woman could breast feed the infant he survived. In the period under consideration, seven children adopted by a new mother were able to survive in this way.

For this particular period it is interesting to compare deaths in kayaks for men (28 cases between 1897-1926) and deaths in childbirth

⁹ In particularly difficult cases, the woman who helped the mother in childbirth, rubbed her hands in seal oil to facilitate the birth.

¹⁰ As a comparison, Bertelsen gives the figure of 2.2% of women having died in childbirth in West Greenland in the period 1851-1900 (Bertelsen 1910 : 477).

for women (25 cases) ¹¹. We thus confirm Bertelsen's data concerning the district of Ummannak in West Greenland for the period 1898-1908. He recorded 23 cases of male kayak deaths for 21 cases of death in childbirth (Bertelsen 1910 : 488 + 495).

If the suicide of elder individuals in traditional society concerned men and women equally, one cause of death could be considered as particularly feminine : Suicide while still young. Several traditional narrations tell of the tragic fate of wives whose husband had died. These women, deprived of their purveyor of game were fated to die if they did not rapidly find a new spouse. The custom of bigamy enabled the absorption of some of the surplus of young women lacking economic support. However, a certain number of young widows would kill themselves and their children, by throwing themselves into the sea, thus ending the pain of hunger and cold.

[265]

In this environment, where family migrations took place by boat during the short Arctic summer, an umiaq would sometimes overturn or sink, full of women and children, while adolescent boys and men accompanying the group in kayaks would survive. One of these accidents, for which we have very precise information, happened to Natanieli's umiaq in July 1914. According to the field notes of Paul-Emile Victor, twelve passengers on board the boat drowned (5 adult women, one mentally retarded youth of 17 years old, a 14 year old young girl and five children ranging from a few months to eight years). The only two survivors were the helmsman, the owner of the boat, and an 11 -month-old baby.

Homicides of women were comparatively lower than those of men. There were, however, a few cases of women dying after being beaten by their husband.

¹¹ 1897-1906 : 9 men died in kayaks ; 7 women died in childbirth ; 1907-1916 : 7 men died in kayaks ; 8 women died in childbirth ; 1917-1926 : 12 men died in kayaks ; 10 women died in childbirth.

Other causes of death

In addition to the other important causes of death for both men and women during the pre-contact period, we find famines and certain diseases.

When the Ammassalimmiut ethnic group was discovered in 1884, they had just undergone a terrible period of famine. According to information recorded by Holm, Mikkelsen (1934 : 46) estimated that between 1881 and 1883, some 70 individuals had died of hunger, which represents a loss equivalent to 15% of the total population.

An extremely cold winter during which the very thick pack ice covered with snow prevented the hunting of seals at the breathing hole, was succeeded by another equally cold winter.

Moreover, the intermediate season of summer had not been sufficiently mild, and thus the population was unable to make provision for the next winter. Dramatic tales of famine have long haunted the oral tradition of this society. In the second half of the 19th century, there were several periods of "great hunger" and of deadly cold (for the lamps were fueled with seal blubber), during which there was no more food left, no rind of blubber, root, or bone to gnaw. Humans started eating their dogs, their indispensable companions, then they chewed on leather straps, their leather clothes and blankets, the leather of their tents and boats. As the final resort, they would, with great apprehension, eat their dead in order to survive. The first victims of famine were the elderly and the young children.

In the publications of Holm (1911), Hansêrak (1933), Mikkelsen (1934), Rasmussen (1938), Rosing (1963) and Victor (1993) we find numerous elements which allow us to evaluate the effects of the famine on the population of Ammassalik between 1881 and 1883. At Qernertivartivit out of a total population of 19, including five hunters, two inhabitants went to find another location where there might be some food left ; those who remained died of hunger and cold, except for two women who survived by eating their dead kin (of the 15 who died of hunger, 13 were eaten according to Holm, 1911 :131-132). Ironically, Kunitse who had abandoned his family to find refuge elsewhere, and the two women (his wife and his mother-in-law) who

had eaten their kin in order to survive, also died of hunger a few years later, in 1892-1893, while spending the winter at Qingeq (according to



Fig. 4 : A kayak hunter looking for prey. Ammassalik 1972.
(Photo : Joelle Robert-Lamblin).

[266]

our documents there were then six dead at this location). When spring returned, only one of the 15 inhabitants was found alive : Ajatoq, in the house of Nunakitsit, in the area of Kulusuk (Holm 1911 :132). There were also many deaths by famine during the winter of 1882-1883, at Inissalik, close to Isertoq, and at least six of the dead were eaten by the last survivors (Holm 1911 : 133).

Famine was present in several regions of East Greenland, during the period 1870-1895, as well as in the north of Ammassalik, at Kialineq, and further south at Anoritoq (Rasmussen in Ostermann 1938 : 56-58). Garde indicates that during the winter following the departure of Holm, in 1886-1887, there was again a famine and cases of anthropophagy at Ammassalik (Garde 1888 : 95). He adds that the reason given by the East Greenlanders to explain this calamity was that it was a punishment to the population, guilty of having stolen Holm's belongings. Regarding these catastrophies affecting this small population, such as continuous bad weather, disappearance of game, or unsuccessful hunting, it is interesting to note that they were generally attributed to a human fault. It may have been theft as in this case, but it could also be the transgression of a taboo, or the bad behaviour of men or women which

were the causes of these punishments inflicted by the Great Forces of the Universe (particularly The Man of The Moon and the Woman of the Sea, mistress of sea animals). The essential function of the shaman was to attempt to re-establish order by identifying the cause of the trouble.

After the beginning of colonization, with the introduction of firearms, there were no longer famines in Ammassalik. But periods of want, when the Ammassalimmiut had to eat their dogs, are mentioned by Hedegaard (1894-1919), in 1906 and in 1908-1909.

Regarding fatal diseases in traditional society, the first physicians who spent the winter in Ammassalik, Knud Poulsen in 1898-1899 and Robert Gessain in 1934-1935, insist on the absence of infectious diseases in epidemic form among the inhabitants of Ammassalik before the first contact with Westerners (Gessain 1975 : 146). Deaths through disease, more frequent among women than men, were mostly due to respiratory illnesses (lung diseases and phthisis according to Poulsen 1904 : 148-149). Other causes of deaths were food poisoning by putrefied meat, abscesses and tumors (of the throat or abdomen), frostbite and gangrene (particularly in the legs among women), and very few cardiac diseases.

Particular cases of sudden insanity, of which there are several examples in oral literature (Victor & Robert-Lamblin 1993 : 74-78, 277-281), resulted in the killing of the insane by his close kin. The justification for this type of homicide was that the delirious person was endangering the whole group. The loss of sanity revealed that the person had made, in great secrecy, a tupilaq intended to kill someone by magic, but not having attained its intended victim, the evil spell had turned against its creator. The killing of the insane individual corresponded to a necessity to protect, at any price, the inhabitants of the common house from malevolent spirits which had taken over one of their kin through his own fault. In our archives, three men (aged 20, 35 and 45) and two women (aged 31 and 42) died in that manner, between 1885 and 1911.

The first exchanges with Westerners provoked terrible epidemics among the Ammassalimmiut population. They had lived in great isolation and lacked immunity towards infectious and contagious diseases such as : The common cold, influenza, whooping cough,

measels, poliomyelitis, small pox, and the like. Discounting the fatal diseases contracted in the south of the country by some visitors from Eastern Greenland who had come to trade in the 19th century (especially in 1872 and 1892), the first epidemic in the Ammassalik area was that of the winter 1892-1893, which followed the visit of Ryder. Disease and famine caused many deaths during that winter, and the succeeding epidemics also took a terrible toll ¹².

Forms of burial

In conclusion, I shall briefly mention the customs and beliefs surrounding death, of which more ample description is given elsewhere. I shall only make remarks of the rituals and the numerous mourning taboos affecting the family of the deceased, more specically his wife and mother, and the person who touched the body to dress him and take him out of the house ¹³.

After a death, in non-Christian East Greenlandic society it was as important to protect the living from the great menace hanging over them at that time as to help the soul of the deceased reach the Country of the Dead with ease. All had to be accomplished very fast, but with infinite precautions, while strictly respecting the established rules and taboos, in order not to endanger the survival of the inhabitants of the place or to contaminate the sea game which would disappear as a result.

The deceased, dressed in his or her best clothes -kayak anorak for the man, amaut for the woman, the hood over the head and the clothes well tightened around the neck, the wrists and the ankles - was either wrapped in a large seal skin which was then sewn up, or in the leather cover of a kayak which was used as a shroud. The body was then tied

¹² 1897 and 1898 : epidemic amongst infants and common cold (mortality rate 51 per 1000 in 1897 ; 47 per 1000 in 1898). 1900 : common cold (mortality rate 42 per 1000). 1910 : whooping cough and influenza (mortality rate 63 per 1000). 1914 and 1915 : influenza (mortality rate 77 per 1000 in 1914, 40 per 1000 in 1915). 1925 : Spanish influenza and poliomyelitis (mortality rate 55 per 1000).

¹³ See Holm 1911 :74-80 ; Petersen 1966-1967 ; Rasmussen in Ostermann 1938 :183-188 ; Victor & Robert-Lamblin 1993 :17-20, 311-315 + 325-345.

at the ankles and, in great haste, dragged out of the house feet first, (or passed through a window for more speed) by the person who had dressed it, who had to be a close kin of the deceased.

The resting place was a grave consisting of a mound of flat stones covering the body or an opening in a rock, closed by stones. However, at the end of the last century, the most frequent form of burial was in the ocean. It was said that of the two Worlds which could be reached by the dead souls, the 'Under Sea World' was a better place. The 'Dead of the Sky' had only crows and berries to eat, while [267] the dead at the bottom of the sea had plenty of sea mammals' meat and blubber. According to tradition, women who died in childbirth, hunters dead in kayaks and those who killed themselves by drowning were fated to rejoin the Under Sea World of the Dead. This explains why those suffering from physical or mental pain would put an end to their life and to that of their young children with a certain amount of serenity : They had the prospect of finding a better life in the nether world. Also, some persons anticipated their natural death for fear of not having a burial if there was no one who could undertake this task for them (either no more family members living, or kin already too weakened by disease or hunger).

The deceased took with him his personal possessions : For a man, for example, his drum, his hunting gear, sometimes his kayak ; for a woman, her lamp, her sewing kit, her personal knife, some parts of her attire ; for a child, his toys.

The house, its contents and inhabitants had then to be purified, before the start of the difficult mourning period for close kin.

Glossary

phthisis = lung tuberculosis

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NOTES

Pour faciliter la consultation des notes en fin de textes, nous les avons toutes converties, dans cette édition numérique des Classiques des sciences sociales, en notes de bas de page. JMT.

[268]

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[Retour à la table des matières](#)

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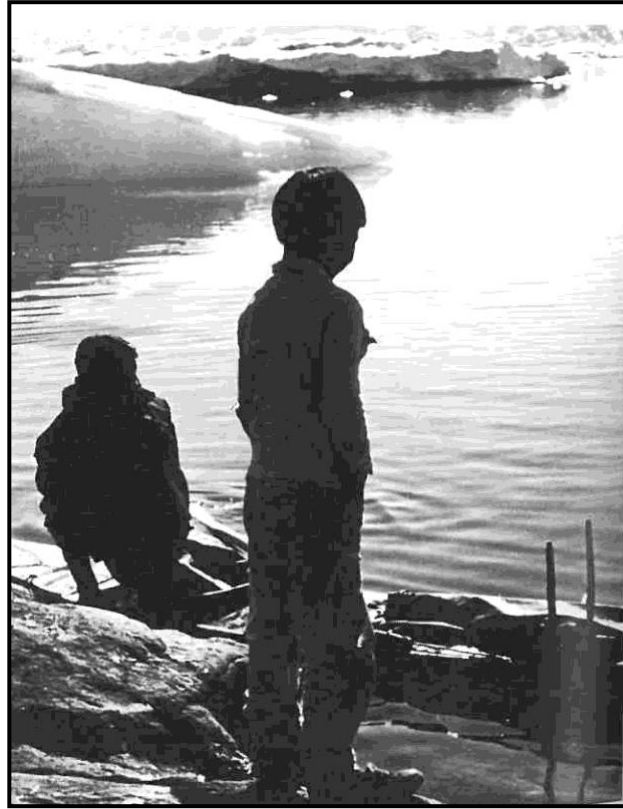


Fig. 5 : Kayak men, Ammassalik 1972.
(Photo : Joelle Robert-Lamblin).