

JOURNAL *of* NORTHERN STUDIES



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The *Journal of Northern Studies* is a peer-reviewed academic publication issued twice a year. The journal has a specific focus on human activities in northern spaces, and articles concentrate on people as cultural beings, people in society and the interaction between people and the northern environment. In many cases, the contributions represent exciting interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approaches. Apart from scholarly articles, the journal contains a review section, and a section with reports and information on issues relevant for Northern Studies.

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Birgitte Sonne, *Worldviews of the Greenlanders. An Inuit Arctic Perspective*, Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press 2017, ISBN 9781602233393 (ebook), 9781602233386 (hardback), 471 pp.

When the first Danish and Moravian missionaries arrived in the land they called Greenland in the early eighteenth century, they thought they would encounter survivors of the Norse settlements. The last of the Viking colonisers had, however, perished about two centuries earlier. Instead, the two competing groups of missionaries met an indigenous population with language and worldviews that differed considerably from their own. Early on, the missionaries began collecting material concerning indigenous traditions and beliefs about the world, human life, and the invisible beings of the “Other World,” in the hope that such information would help them in their missionary endeavour. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, more indigenous traditions were collected by travellers and ethnographers. It is this comprehensive material that Birgitte Sonne has used as the basis for her analysis. But that is not all. She also seeks “to relate precolonial Greenlandic ideas about their way of life and its preconditions to the cosmologies of the other Inuit and the Yupiit” (p. 10). Using this comparative method, she suggests interpretations of themes and details that the Greenlandic sources are silent about. The result is an informative and highly readable text, based on an impressive amount of literature and several decades of wrestling with the sources and different interpretations thereof.

The early pages of the “Introduction” (pp. 1–48) give some basic information about Greenland and the various indigenous populations. This is followed by short sections on the process of colonization, research history, method, and pre- and early contact history. Next, the author presents the sources for each region and briefly explains the various theoretical perspectives that have informed the study. The final part of the introduction sketches out the plan of the ensuing chapters.

In Chapter 1, “Space and Time” (pp. 49–114), the central focus, Sonne writes, “is on the analogies of bodily positions, movements, and the senses, which dominate relations between This World and the Other World(s)” (p. 50). One of the main concepts here is *sila*, an Inuit term that connotes space, air, the visible world, etc.—and in Sonne’s interpretation also “balance.” This the author discusses in relation to both time and space, including the invisible spaces that are populated by beings who speak a language of their own. One section deals with orientation, another with balance. In the former, Sonne describes how the year, the day, and the life-spans of humans and wild animals were divided, and how one oriented oneself in space with reference to the point the speaker occupies on the boundary between land and sea, standing facing the sea, with right, left, forward-downward and behind-upward as the cardinal directions. Here she also briefly reviews how people sustained themselves from land and sea, the animals they hunted, and the materials they used when making equipment for transport, hunting, and building longhouses. In the section about balance, Sonne discusses the balance of both the land and the human body. For example, since the world was regarded as a disc, which, according to one story (found in several variants) had once turned upside down, thus making the mountainous underside the new surface, there is a widespread fear that the world might suddenly flip back over once again. For the human being, or more precisely, for a person with *sila*, it was the mobile upright position that was regarded as balanced and typical. The final sections of the chapter deal with imagined beings of the sea (ani-

mal- and human-like) and the land (like dwarves and giants), and how they are presented in traditional narratives.

In addition to its titular themes, the second chapter, “Seasonal Rituals and Rituals of Crises” (pp. 115–156), examines life-cycle rituals. Although Sonne regards the role of the seasonal rituals as negligible, she does discuss some examples in relation to comparable rituals among other Inuit groups. At New Year (winter solstice) there was feasting, drum singing, the strictly ritualised exchange of spouses (which Sonne refers to by the traditional term of wife exchanges), and, in East Greenland, also masked dances and the occasional public initiation of a new ritual specialist, the *angakkoq*. Further, during spring, summer, and autumn collective rituals were celebrated in different parts of Greenland. However, the source material contains little information about these seasonal rituals. What they tell us more about is the life-cycle rituals in connection with “individual birth (and abortion), menstruation, ‘ritual firsts,’ the death of a relative, and the life-renewing rites of individual animals” (p. 147). The “ritual firsts” that were celebrated include, for example, the first tooth and the first step, but the celebration that ranked highest was that of a young man’s first catch. A young man could marry after the celebration of his first catch, a young woman once she had put up her hair in a topknot after her first menstruation (which was not celebrated); she was regarded as an adult only after the birth of her first child.

In “The Other World(s) and Its Beings,” Chapter 3 (pp. 157–209), Sonne begins by comparing two terms for the Other World(s) or for different aspects of them: West Greenlandic *silam aappaa* for the realm of death, and East Greenlandic *asia* for the Other World of the land and its spirits. Whereas dwarves and giants were regarded as living “inside hummocks, hills, and mountains; the *innersuit* (big fire spirits) [...] [were found] upside down under the foreshore and skerries” (p. 158). These *innersuit* were regarded as human-like, but without noses, because, according to the narratives about them, there is no wind where they live and therefore they do not breathe. Nevertheless, they live like humans and hunt at sea. The land spirits, on the other hand, were regarded as doing many things differently from humans, but their methods, so the stories tell us, differed depending on their size. The *angakku* (sg. *angakkoq*), the most important ritual specialists, were considered the only humans capable of travelling to the Other World(s). Using examples of these journeys as described in the stories, Sonne notes differences between West and East Greenlandic traditions. Spirits were regarded as more similar to humans than animals, although neither had the correct (human) balance in their bodies. However, unlike humans, who are mortal, the spirits lived forever. Deceased humans were regarded as existing, in a realm either beneath the sea or above in the sky, where they produced the Northern Lights by playing ball.

Also in this chapter, Sonne discusses “origin myths.” These include variants of the Inuit flood story and stories about the origin of death, noted down by Poul Egede as early as the 1730s. Sonne illustrates a serious source-critical problem with a Polar Inuit (i.e. not Greenlandic) story about the origin of the earth, recorded by Knud Rasmussen. She compares his original manuscript in Greenlandic with a later fair copy (with Danish translation) and notes that in the latter version Rasmussen combined the original short, incoherent notes into a story, a type of construction it is easy to be seduced by, but which, needless to say, one should not trust.

Another section deals with “anthropology” in the strict sense, i.e. how people perceive other human beings, in this case in relation to both animals and different types of non-visible beings. Sonne begins with an analysis of the central concept *inua* which she

glosses as “a being with recognizable habits and a characteristic way of life, individually, or by species” (p. 192), i.e. a person. After a discussion of the theoretical perspectives of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro and Terence Turner, she returns to Greenland and notes that both animals and humans dress in animal skins when they go outside. But inside, humans are undressed except for their underclothes (*naatsit*), which Sonne interprets as “the visible cultural mark of (Greenlandic) humans” (p. 198).

Another interesting section is about *taartaq* (East Greenlandic), the language of the beings of the Other World(s). In the stories, this language is presented as being intelligible to humans. One of its characteristics was that it described humans as active. Words for body parts, for example, focused on action. Another characteristic of *taartaq* was that it was gendered. Summer, for example, which in ordinary language is called *aasaq*, was called *arnaavoq*, ‘the season of women.’ Another important aspect was the opposition between outside and inside. For example, “to die,” which could be expressed with “to go out” in the language of humans, was “to go in” in the language of the others. When an *angakkoq* performed, he would begin by using ordinary human language, but when he started using *taartaq*, it was a sign that a spirit had entered into him and was now the one who was talking.

The fourth chapter (pp. 211–325), with the title “*Angakut* (Shamans),” is by far the longest. As mentioned, the *angakut* were the most important indigenous ritual specialists. Most were men, and a few were women. They lived ordinary lives except when performing. No less than around 20 per cent of the population were *angakut*. There were various ranks, among which the highest was held by those who were considered capable of travelling to the Other World(s)—by flying, gliding or floating. In East Greenland, where the most important material about them was collected, an elder *angakkoq* could ask parents to entrust a child to him or her as a pupil, or one could start on one’s own. If a child wanted to become an *angakkoq*, it was expected that the parents should be supportive, although it was also important to keep the activity secret during the many years of apprenticeship prior to a ritual public disclosure. A baby born with a caul or whose elder brothers and sisters had all died could also be cultivated as an “*angakkoq-to-be*” by ritual or teaching. Finally, a person could be called by a spirit to become an *angakkoq*, although stories about such callings are not common in Greenland, Sonne concludes.

Stories about the lives of well-known *angakut* allow us to distinguish three stages in the initiation process, which Sonne summarizes with many good examples. (1) There had to be a meeting with a spirit and a private initiation. This was followed by (2) several years of securing, in secret, the help of other spirits. And finally, (3) a ritual disclosure with the first public performance. The private initiation normally took place in summer, the public ritual at New Year or in spring.

(1) According to the stories, during the first initiation, the apprentice was “killed,” and while unconscious he or she would receive light (*qaamaneq*), from the moon, some stars, or the Northern Lights, before being reborn with the ability to see both This World and the Other World(s).

(2) Our knowledge of the years of apprenticeship derives from East Greenlandic sources. One of the purposes was, as mentioned, to enlist helping spirits (*taartat*), some of whom were inherited from deceased *angakut*, although most were *inuut* (pl. of *inua*) of land, shore and sea. Apprentices had teachers, often several, who were paid for their instruction. It is also reported that spirits sometimes served as teachers. Some *inuut* came to the apprentice of their own accord. Others were invoked by various methods, such as rubbing a small stone on a larger one in circles, or were encountered by chance. The *taar-*

tat were regarded as servants of the *angakkoq* and assisted him or her when called upon, one at a time. Sonne also discusses certain individual “spirits” and their role, and discusses them in relation to historical research.

(3) It was the first public performance that made the novice into an *angakkoq*, someone “who travels to places beyond the reach of ordinary humans” (p. 214). Although the public performance was the main event, often the ritual also included the presentation of the helping spirits of the *angakkoq*. Sonne uses the biographies of some well-known *angakkuut* as the basis for her presentation, in which she also compares different versions of the ritual. For male a *angakkoq* it was a requirement that he should be married. Further, he needed a male relative who was willing to participate in the ritual as a support.

In her analysis of the functions of the *angakkoq*, Sonne looks “across the northern continents for comparisons” (p. 217). In her descriptions, she uses the word “shaman” far more often than the Greenlandic word, thus identifying the *angakkoq* as such. When it comes to two other types of ritual specialists, the *qilalik* (p. 218 f.) and the *ilisiitsoq* (pp. 250–259), she, like earlier researchers, is more hesitant. Concerning Bernard Saladin d’Anglure’s hypothesis that Inuit “shamans” belonged to a third sex, Sonne concludes that there is no example of cross-gendered upbringing in the preserved *angakkoq* biographies. Even if one could earn fame and respect as an *angakkoq*, “the element of entertainment was as prevalent as curing and restoring the balance with the Other World,” she later adds (p. 399).

One section (pp. 250–259) in the chapter is devoted to *ilisiinneq*, a practice that on the one hand was “meant to do harm, be that for individual or social ends” (p. 252), and on the other was used to counteract *ilisiinneq* by others and for protection. Here, Sonne begins by reviewing the sources, ranging from Hans Egede, who did not distinguish between *angakkuut* (practitioners of *angakkuuneq*) and *ilisiitsut* (practitioners of *ilisiinneq*), and his son Poul, who was the first to present the simplistic idea (still sometimes held) of the former as good, the latter as evil, through to the ethnographers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As Sonne emphasises, “*ilisiinneq* was not necessarily an immoral act” (p. 256). The morally benign uses of the practice included, for example, to

decide on the right name for a new-born baby; cure bad luck in hunting; stop an attack of insanity [...], kayak dizziness, or shingles; calm down a storm; and ingeniously remove a severe taboo on eating during starvation. (p. 256)

Chapter 5, “*Angakkoq Puulik* (Shaman with a Bag)” (pp. 327–382), deals with the few *angakkuut* who were considered capable of becoming invisible to the inhabitants of the Other World(s). This was regarded as necessary if he or she wanted to visit there. If the *angakkoq* did not render themselves invisible through the use of a *pooq*, ‘cover, skin, clothing; protection,’ for example, an anorak made from the gut of the bearded seal, he or she would be attacked by the dangerous guardians of the Other World(s). This type of *angakkuut*, which only occurs in stories from East, Southeast and South Greenland, has long been one of Sonne’s focal interests. She published her first article on the subject in 1986.

In her “Conclusion” (Ch. 6) (pp. 383–416), Sonne comments on the text and her method of aligning the Greenlandic material with information about other Inuit groups and the Yupiit. Her conclusion is she has discovered “no contradictions, only variations” (p. 383). She also makes some interesting comments on her own interpretations of elements of Greenlandic worldviews: her arguments for adding the meaning of ‘balance’ to *sila*; and for regarding the trickster Raven as impersonating “the transformational

boundary between sea and land" (p. 385), balancing between above and below. Related to this is the balance in body that is characteristic of human beings (in contrast to both animals and "spirits"). She illuminates the importance of the rituals at New Year, including the public initiation of a new *angakkoq*; to the fear that the sky might fall, despite the various ideas people had about how it was held in place—by pillars and mountains, by the winds, or by the rainbow; to the crucial role of naming, which "transformed the baby into a genuine human" (p. 395); and to the idea that "animals, deceased persons, and spirits belonged in the Other Worlds" (p. 398). On the subject of sex and gender, she notes that "a level of male dominance cannot be talked away" (p. 397). In a short "Coda" (pp. 383 f.), she repeats that she has been inspired by many different theoretical perspectives but has found others insufficient.

In addition to the text, the book contains several maps and other illustrations (photos and drawings). Two of them show "the mirror effect of the localizers (right, left, up behind, down in front" in relation to the cardinal directions on the west and east coasts respectively (p. 38 f.; unfortunately, there is a misprint in fig. 7: *avannamut* on the top should be translated 'to the right', not 'to the left'). The book ends with a reference list and a very helpful index.

If the tendency in culture studies is towards a focus on the local, Sonne has—as her subtitle makes clear—chosen another perspective. In analysing the worldviews that interest her, she relates them to and interprets them against the background of a comprehensive Inuit context. This means that where information is lacking in the Greenlandic source material, Sonne adduces comparable circumstances among other Inuit groups and also among the Yupiit. She then looks for words that are etymologically related to Greenlandic words under the assumption that the phenomena these words denote in Inuit and Yup'ik also existed in Greenland. But even if this assumption might be true, it cannot be taken for granted. Here and there, there is a tendency to jump to the parallels too quickly. If there is an Inuit or Yup'ik parallel somewhere, Sonne uses it to fill in the lacunae in the Greenlandic material as if related cultures were always similar, even in their details. This strategy is probably influenced by her commitment to the idea that Thule Culture was predominant throughout the area from the twelfth to the fourteenth centuries (p. xv f.). However, closely related cultures often manifest interesting differences. Here I think it would have been a better strategy to base the analysis to a greater extent on the Greenlandic sources and to accept that, where the local sources are silent, we cannot know what Greenlanders traditionally did or thought. The parallels could then perhaps be used in support of carefully formulated hypotheses (which should be presented as such), not as short-cuts to the construction of a coherent narrative without any gaps. This hunt for parallels as tools of interpretation becomes even more problematic, I think, when in some instances they are looked for among Native American and Siberian cultures.

As a historian of religions, I find it interesting to note that, although the themes discussed in the book are usually (or at least often) summarized under the label of "religion," that concept is not used (except very occasionally, and the same is true for "religious"). This is an interesting choice, and there are probably good reasons for it. "Worldview," on the other hand, is discussed, but neither justified nor defined. In any case, these Western concepts—and many others used in the book, like "shaman," "soul," and "spirit"—select certain phenomena for analysis, thereby (most probably) obscuring indigenous Greenlandic distinctions.

It seems as if Sonne does not always trust her own knowledge or the Greenlandic source material, but shows too much reverence for researchers with little or no knowl-

edge of Greenlandic traditions. In the section about how the human being was traditionally perceived, she tries to find what she calls “the common spiritual essence inside all bodies as defined by Viveiros de Castro” (p. 198), as if this excellent specialist on Amazonian cultures would be an indispensable source to and interpreter of Greenlandic anthropologies. And concerning the *angakktut*-to-be she writes that “some served a full apprenticeship, while others had to stop but might practice anyway, unintentionally disturbing the accepted definitions found in many academic writings” (p. 233). Although this might be meant ironically, the use and discussion of the concepts of “shaman” and “shamanism” makes me think that she lends too much weight to the “academic writings” of non-specialists (of Greenlandic worldviews, that is), as if forgetting that she herself is the pre-eminent specialist.

This unnecessary reliance on models developed in conjunction with the interpretation of cultures remote from the Greenlandic is especially evident in the chapter on the *angakktut*. In a brief review of historical research, she compares ideas from general studies on “shamanism” with information in Greenlandic sources that specifically concern the *angakktut*. Even if Sonne is critical towards the definitions of “shamanism” she refers to (those of Åke Hulkrantz and Ioan M. Lewis), she still retains the concepts of “shaman” and “shamanism” as points of departure for her own analysis. This obliges her to relate the Greenlandic material to discussions about these terms, discussions of questionable relevance for the analysis of the different roles and functions of the *angakktut*. This is especially surprising since she writes that she will treat the issues in Chapter 4 “in a Greenlandic context and limit comparisons to salient differences and similarities” (p. 211). Here it would have been possible to continue using the indigenous terms and terminologies as her main analytical tools, as she does in most of the other parts of the book. Instead of presenting “The East Greenlandic Shaman, Emically Defined” (heading on p. 217), to mention one example, one would have preferred an emic definition of *angakkoq*.

Despite these critical comments, I have only admiration for this excellent book. It is informed by the deep knowledge of an author who has studied the worldviews of Greenlanders and other Inuit for at least 50 years, and who knows the relevant languages (something which is not as self-evident as it should be). Agreements and disagreements with other researchers are noted and she gives good and (at least for the present reviewer) convincing arguments for her own position. Also, she mentions several examples of things where she has changed her interpretation during the many years she has been wrestling with Greenlandic traditions, and this is as unusual in academic texts as it is congenial. When Sonne uses a certain term where an alternative would have been possible, her reasons for doing so are—with a few exceptions—well considered, as are also many of the other choices she has made in the process of writing. As a reader one is guided by a highly knowledgeable author with great respect for the traditions she analyses.

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