

Arnarluunguaq – Little Big Woman

by Marianne Puamana Rasmussen

You have probably heard about the explorer Knud Rasmussen, who in 1921 to 1924 travelled from Greenland along the Northwest Passage through Arctic Canada and Alaska to the Pacific Ocean and Siberia. A distance of 18.000 kms over roughly 4 years.

Who you probably have not heard of, is Arnarulunnguaq, a woman from the Greenlandic Inuit nation, and the first female explorer that travelled with Knud Rasmussen. With the skills and gifts she had, you could easily think she was a traditional *angakkog*, which is almost the same as a shaman.

Originally, the specific shaman of Greenland derived from the migrations from Siberia. What differs the Greenlandic shaman from, e.g., a shaman in Hawaii, is that she/he goes into a trance to enter the spirit world. As such, you could categorize the *angakkog* of Greenland to be a warrior shaman. This is put into perspective by the dramatic and bloody myths of the *angakkogs*. There is a myth about an *angakkog*, who was unfortunate to be caught by spirits of the sky. They played ball with him and beat him to death with sticks. Contrary to this, we know the shamanism of Hawaii to be the “Way of the Adventurer,” which is a harmonious way filled with love, with aloha.

Arnarulunnguaq was born on a night with a full moon, hard frost and the northern lights across the sky. According to the Inuits, children born under the northern lights are gifted with particular skills and enjoy special protection by the spirits. Her father was a skillful fisherman and hunter, and besides Arnarulunnguaq, he and his wife had four sons. When her father died at a young age, the Inuit tradition was that the youngest of the children, if it was a girl, should die by hanging. As Arnarulunnguaq was a girl and the youngest of the children, she had to put the rope around her neck. However, her brothers cried so heartbreakingly over fear of losing her, that the rope was removed from her neck and thus she avoided death. So at the age of seven she began a new life.

As a child, Arnarulunnguaq learned about (the few) herbs and berries growing in Thule, a missionary and trading post established by Knud Rasmussen in northwestern Greenland. She learned especially about the black crowberries, rich with C-vitamin, and a remedy against inflammatory diseases as well as snow blindness. Those around her felt uplifted when she sang and danced. She could also communicate with birds,

fish and other animals... and human beings, when they needed it. She could read signs and omens in the landscape around her, in the snow, clouds and the wind. She used her dreams as a guide for what was to come. She was sharp, funny and had a sanguine temperament. At times she became introverted, as in moments where her thoughts and the signs she saw were intense.

Arnarulunnguaq was not arrogant, but she was confident. She was humble and radiated strength. Seeing her special qualities, Knud Rasmussen offered her and her cousin to participate in the great dog sledge tour to Siberia.

Arnarulunnguaq could cook, repair clothes etc., take care of the dogs and build igloos in minus 122 degrees Fahrenheit. She got up in the morning and fed the dogs, made her morning rituals and centered herself, looked at the sky to decipher what it said about the new day. She noticed how the birds fly, listened to their cackling and analyzed the form and quality of the snow. Then she went on and made breakfast for the men. Her nightly dream entered her mind. In her dream the sledge dogs rushed across the ice. Then suddenly there was a dark and stormy wind. There was only one thing to do, stop the dogs and sledges and seek shelter. At breakfast she spoke with the men about her dream and suggested that maybe they should postpone the journey by a day.

The story of Arnarulunnguaq, who was the only woman to complete the sledge journey from Greenland to Siberia with Knud Rasmussen and her cousin, is being turned into a film by the producers Steen Herdel and co-producer Marianne E. S. Rasmussen.

Arnarulunnguaq's efforts were unique, as she possessed all the amazing Inuit qualities needed for the expedition to succeed. Knud Rasmussen acknowledged that without her, it would not have been possible,. The film tells the story of the dramatic and historical adventure with the help of archives, new footage, dramatizations and animation. Arnarulunnguaq appears on stamps, on new bank notes and a statue of her has been erected in Nuuk. The film is a cinema production, and for educational use, TV etc. The film is a tribute to the Inuit Culture and to Greenland.