



Iqallijuq or the Recollections of an Inuit Name-Soul

By Bernard Saladin d'Anglure

Abstract: *Iqallijuq, also named Savviuqталik after her maternal grandfather from who she received simultaneously name and identity, is an old Inuk woman from Igloodik (Nunavut). Iqallijuq relates her earliest memories to her granddaughter, Kublu. She recalls the time, just after the death of Savviuqталik, when she was the name-soul of the old man in his grave. She relates how she left the grave and entered the womb of Savviuqталik's daughter, who later became her mother. She describes her life in the womb, how she changed sex before leaving for the outside world, her life as a transvestite during childhood and, finally, the acquiring of her status of womanhood at the beginning of menstruation; symbolic death of the eponymous ancestor or beginning of a new cycle for the name-soul.*

Article

This fascinating account came from an old Inuit woman in the Canadian Arctic named Iqallijuq. I met her for the first time in 1971 while doing anthropological research in Igloodik in the Northwest Territories [now known as Nunavut]. Over several visits spread over a number of weeks, I explored the traditional Inuit belief system with Iqallijuq and Ujarak – her first common law husband until they were forced to separate. In the 1920s, the two had come to know the celebrated Danish explorer and anthropologist Knud Rasmussen rather well, as he stayed twice in the home of Ujarak’s parents, the shamans Ava and Urulu; these shamans were two of Rasmussen’s best informants and their stories figure prominently in the reports from the famous Fifth Thule Expedition.

In 1922, when Rasmussen met the young couple, Iqallijuq and Ujarak had both just reached the sexual status of adult for their respective biological sexes. From birth until adolescence, both of them had been transvestites because their biological sex was different from that of their eponyms. Iqallijuq received her first womens’ clothing when she menstruated for the first time, and Ujarak was only given his mens’ clothing when he had killed his first caribou. It was during an interview about the Inuit concept of social reproduction that Iqallijuq responded to a question about birth and intra-uterine memories among the Inuit of Igloodik by recounting, in vivid detail, her own memories of such events.





Uterine memories, an Inuit narrative genre

Between 1965 and 1971, during previous research throughout the Quebec Arctic and on Baffin Island, I collected several short accounts of uterine memories, and this prompted me to explore the theme more systematically. The first pieces of information came from the Kangirsujuaq area (Maricourt-Wakeham) on the Hudson Strait's South coast, where some elderly Inuit informants remembered hearing a woman named Irqaviaq, long since dead, recounting her birth.

In 1967 George Aananak, an Inuk from Kangirsualujjuaq (George River or Port Nouveau-Québec) in Ungava Bay, was the first to tell me his own birth memories, although not in much detail. He died the following year before I could question him further.

Three years later at Kinngait (Cape Dorset) on Baffin Island, another Inuk, Piita Pitsiulaaq, who was renowned throughout the region for his genealogical and historical knowledge, provided me with a new short account of intra-uterine and birth memories, which I tape recorded and which he set down on paper a few years later in the Inuit language, writing in syllabics. His story, later published in English by Dorothy Eber in *People from Our Side*, included the following:

It will be hard to believe what I am about to write. I can remember before I was born. It seems like a dream. I remember I had to go through a very narrow channel. The passage was so narrow I thought it would be impossible. I didn't realize the passage was my mother – I thought it was a crevice in the ice. That ice crevice must have been my mother's bones. I remember it took a long time to go through. Once I turned back – it was too hard. But finally I was outside; I was born. I think I opened my eyes inside my mother but after I was born I opened my eyes again and all I could see were two little cliffs on either side of me. I often remember this: I saw something blue and those cliffs which were exactly the same... which were probably my mother's thighs... [1975:49]

In my recorded version he added that he also saw lush vegetation, which was the caribou skin on which his mother was crouching.

Finally, in 1971, in the Belcher Islands (Qikirtait, N.W.T), a thousand kilometres from the earlier village, a young Inuit woman named Aani Qitusuk told me shortly her birth memories.

It thus became more and more apparent that this type of memory had to be quite common among the Inuit, and in very remote areas without contact between them, and that I could study the subject if I took the trouble to investigate it methodically.

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One could even infer that in Inuit culture, uterine memories existed as a possibility in a latent state, as a sort of narrative genre used in certain circumstances by certain individuals.

The name-soul

To grasp the full scope of Iqallijuq's story, one must first be familiar with the Inuit concept of the name as a psychic agency and fundamental to personal identity.

A name is always transmitted to the newborn from someone either living or dead. Passing on a name in this way ensures the reincarnation of the name-soul; it follows a given life from one body to another in an endless cycle of reproduction, thus establishing a long homonymic chain that protects the living and transfers to him or her the sum of all the qualities and capabilities of their namesakes.

The soul-name also creates a [shared] identity between the previous bearer and the new namesake, bestowing upon him the social identity of the first. The name is thus a symbol of the continuity of social life on earth, ensuring its continued existence. An individual also often has several names – each of them operating according to the principles just stated – conferring a multiple and flexible social and psychic identity in one single form.

This oneness is expressed through another psychic agency, the shadow-soul or *tarniq*. A shadow, double or reflection of the living being, without weight or substance, it survives in the next world after the death of the body. The connection between the shadow-soul and the body is a fragile one: it can escape during sleep or a shamanic trance, and can also be stolen through magic. But because, according to the Inuit, the life (*inuusiq*) of each individual has a predetermined duration, the shadow-soul waits to enter the afterlife when that person's life span is over. If by some accident the *tarniq* is separated from the person prematurely, it will seek to return to life as a phantom or a ghost. The connection between the shadow-soul, the body and the name-soul is expressed in a final agency: the breath (*anirniq*) issued from cosmic breath *Sila* that goes inside the newborn child at the moment of birth and returns to *Sila* at death.

Namesakes and kinship relationships

Before discussing the story of Iqallijuq, I should also draw attention to the genealogical relationships of the main characters if we are going grasp the full effect of namesakes and on kinship relationships:

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Savviuqталik, the maternal grandfather and namesake of Iqallijuq, had a sister Nuvvijaq whom he loved very much; when she died, he gave her name to his newborn daughter, who thus also became Nuvvijaq, and later the mother of Iqallijuq. His affection for his sister carried over to his daughter; the child was his beloved sister reincarnated, and he addressed her as if she were his departed sister.

When Nuvvijaq gave birth to Iqallijuq, she had just lost her father, Savviuqталik. Iqallijuq was considered to be the reincarnation of Savviuqталik and so became the brother of Nuvvijaq, her mother.

The symbolic dimension

The richness of the story, the content of which at times resembles dream, myth and ritual, is largely due to its symbolic dimension. It begins in a grave where the name-soul becomes conscious of his new destiny in life, continues in a uterine-home where he prepares for his life and then in the in the back pouch of his mother's coat as he begins life, and ends in the garments of a young woman as she discovers her female destiny when the body she was reincarnated in menstruates for the first time. It is still life, only its terms change.

Through the various episodes in a story that uses symbols rich in shapes and colours, we can see emerge the cultural responses the Inuit have developed to overcome the great constraints of existence – death, sexual differentiation, dependence on game. Imaginary constructions where the fetus holds central position and whose components find their meaning in the cycle of life within the womb, a place of symbolic discourse that illustrates an essential aspect of social reproduction and the reproduction of life

At the beginning of this article we discussed the name-soul and its relationship with other agencies such as the shadow-soul and the breath. Now we need to come back to these concepts and add the information provided in the memories of Iqallijuq in an effort to better define what constitutes the individual, its personhood and identity

Individual, person and identity

The individual or *inuk* (human being) is defined first of all as a being endowed with life and then as indivisible although reproducible for part of that life. It results from the combination of a body (*timi*), the fetal components of which we shall see later, a vital breath or *anirniq*, the recognized name-souls or *atiit* (plural form of *atiq*) giving individual personalities and a shadow-soul – *tarniq*, image of the living body. The individual





disappears and the connection between these agencies is broken when the breath, the shadow-soul and the name(s) leave the body.

The name-soul is reincarnated in a new individual while the shadow-soul, now freed, departs for the spirit world, retaining the appearance of the individual at the time of his death. This supernatural shadow-soul and its reincarnatable expression, the name, thus bears the mark of the deceased person: they reflect not only the last physical state of the deceased, but all of his qualities and abilities, either inherited or acquired by the individual through his life experiences and the various identities he received along with his names. During his life cycle, the individual can reproduce using a biological mode; at death, he can reproduce through the retransmission of his name – a symbolic or metaphorical mode. In both cases the process of reproduction operates from multiple to unique and from unique to multiple; it requires two to reproduce biologically and it is preferable to have more than one child, while on the symbolic level, it is common for several eponyms to supply their name to a single infant, thereby giving it multiple identities in the same individuality; on the other hand the same name is often transmitted simultaneously to several children.

The identity due to name establishes an equivalence between the namesakes and confers on the name's recipient the status of the person who gave it. So it is the name that carries, to varying degrees, the qualities, abilities and desires of the eponym. These attributes are cumulative from one transmission to another, which provides the homonymic line with a guardian for all those alive bearing the name.

The components of the fetus

At Savviuqtalik's death, his name-soul left his lifeless body and set out in search of a woman's body to enter so that he could reincarnate. The name-soul bears the appearance of the deceased and feels his symbolic desires: the desire to be given water, the desire to be warmed – the same desires as a traveller seeking shelter and hospitality. This name-soul's choice settles on the homonym of his dead sister, his own daughter, whom he identifies as the eponym. He seeks her hospitality in the dual senses of uterine shelter and the domestic hearth. His entry into her uterus marks the starting point of her pregnancy. The shadow-soul *tarniq*, who had been lurking by the grave during this time, can now depart in peace for the other world. The reincarnation of the name has freed him, and thus plays an important role in maintaining equilibrium within the group, which fears wandering souls as a source of sickness and death.

The story then goes on to mention the generative role of sperm, which nourishes and grows the fetus. In fact the sperm builds the fetus while blocking the uterus so that the menstrual blood does not flow; its white colour which is also found in the skeleton is the





same colour as the moon, the fertilizing male spirit. It is the male principle transmitted by the male reproductive organ, which here takes the form of a dog, the only domestic animal of the Inuit and which plays an important role in their production activities. The dog vomits food for the fetus, reversing the order of daily life where a dog receives food when it enters the igloo. Other symbols are sometimes used to represent the male sex – *qajaq*, dogsled, fire poker, bow, harpoon, and knife —and the last two of these appear in the description of the men’s tools present in the uterus.

The life-blood of the female is highly emotionally charged: negative when it flows during menstruation or miscarriages (miscarriages are called *aururtuq*: he changed into blood), positive at menarche which presages procreative capacity and later when it ‘clots’ into a successful pregnancy (the root word of *illauq*, the shamanic word for fetus, is “knot”). Its red colour is also associated with the sun and the oil lamp’s flame, both female symbols. Other female symbols in the story are the uterus-igloo, the semi-circular knife and the pot, or in fact all containers or round shapes. Blood establishes a special bond between uterine siblings, a connection that creates a solidarity which we find again in the extension of prohibitions following the birth of a blood sibling and also in Iqallijuq’s story when the mother discovers she is pregnant and fears losing the child. She believes the fetus wants to follow its five older siblings, which were stillborn. This belief was not unfounded as Iqallijuq died twice after she was born. *Mikliaqtigiit* is the word for those who have shared the same umbilic cord.

The fourth element making up the fetus is the animal flesh the mother consumes during her pregnancy, which according to several informants affects the growth of the fetus. We will return to this later.

To summarize, the fetus is formed by the combining of the name-soul and its desire for life, the sperm – which is a factor in its shaping and growth, the life-blood of the mother, and animal flesh. These four elements create structural relationships between the human in process of becoming, and his social, natural and supernatural world. At birth *Sila*, cosmic breath add part of himself to animate the newborn child.

Forces of life and death

Iqallijuq’s story contains dramatic elements that are expressed particularly in the battle between the forces of life and death over the fetus in the womb and the newborn child.

The first lethal threat comes from the blood siblings of Iqallijuq, who were all stillborn. Due to the solidarity created by blood kinship, which according to Inuit theory results from the fact that they shared the same umbilical cord, these older siblings would

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try to lure the fetus to leave life and join them in *Akunnig* an other world for still-born children, located between the earth and the upperworld. Their unhappy mother Nuvvijaq, who desires children at all costs, fears this fatal outcome from the moment she learns she is pregnant. So she and her husband apply their energies to providing the fetus with additional life force. Every morning as soon as she awakens, she exits the igloo, methaphorically encouraging the fetus to emerge quickly and well. This is one of the rules prescribed for pregnant women. Her husband follows another rule, by having frequent sex with his wife so that his sperm strengthens the structure of the fetus as well as the plug blocking the uterus.

The second lethal threat comes from Savviuqtalik himself. He had indicated before his death that he was tired of the life of a hunter and of being exposed to bad weather and the dangers and exhaustion of the hunt. As the reincarnation of the old man's name-soul, the fetus is heavily influenced by this desire and so reluctant to exit in male form. This reluctance results in a very long labour for the mother, and is the symbolic explanation for it. The long labour puts the life of the child at risk, and the midwife and her assistant quickly intervene to accelerate the process by using magical practices called *qilaniq*. This private method of magic enables them to rapidly enter into communication with the spirit of someone dead or living, and so they are able to engage in dialogue with the fetus and persuade him to be born in the sexual form he has chosen. So the birth occurs. But the child's life remains fragile; the body, the shadow-soul, the name-soul and the breath, newly combined, are still precariously connected.

The incarnation of Savviuqtalik comes with a hunger and thirst that the name-soul feels very strongly through the newborn, and which the mother satisfies and quenches first by touching the infant's mouth with food, and then by filling a *minguliqtiquiqarvik* (a small leather cone), symbolic of the eponym's stomach. However the effectiveness of this intervention, which is intended to satisfy the name-soul, is highly ambiguous; recall here that for Nuvvijaq, the infant is at the same time her daughter, her reincarnated father, and her beloved brother as a result of a double homonymy. On an empirical level, being sated with food ordinarily causes the hunter to relax and the newborn to fall asleep, but at this point in the passage from one life cycle to another, the name-soul does not yet seem to have settled on his real personality and satisfaction, all symbolic because he has not actually ingested anything, resulting in a sleep which experientially transposed means the loss of breath and the death of the child.

Terrified, Nuvvijaq calls Ittuliaq, her Shaman husband for help. He decides to use a shamanic practice called *sakajuq*, which involves a spirit helper. He tries to wake up Savviuqtalik by reminding him that he is with his favourite sister. His appeal is heard, the name-soul awakens and the newborn comes back to life; but not for long because the lethal





forces are still strong. Very tired, Savviuqtaalik falls asleep again and the child again grows numb and dies.

After this fourth attack on its vitality, the situation of the newborn becomes critical. Only a transfusion can save it, and this comes from a “donor” from outside the family in the form of an additional name full of vitality, the name of a neighbour, Arnaqtaa, a very old, childless woman Shaman. The transfusion of life force through her name occurs subtly; by linking their two lives, Arnaqtaa will be able to confront the deadly influences assailing her little namesake with all the strength that her long life has given her.

Arnataaq is willing to run this risk because she has no descendents of her own and the idea of living on through the child is very appealing. To make her intervention more effective, she decides to give the child one of her alternate names, Iqallijuq, which she has never used after it became her spirit helper, a mythic character which therefore is brand new in its “desire for life.” The new name will provide the person of the newborn and its identities with a strong envelope of protection, and in addition Iqallijuq – which is what she will now be called – can live to be very old, just like the one who saved her life.

Sexual and Gender differentiation

Along with death, sexual differentiation appears in Iqallijuq’s story as another great constraint Inuit culture seeks to overcome. The problem is posed on a psychological level right from the outset because of the story’s genre, the reminiscences of a name-soul, and also because of its content – the transmigration of the name-soul from the body of a man to one of a woman. This level of the story – of the name-soul and the identity attached to it, is the dominant one, and provides the foundation for the other levels, which include beliefs regarding sexual differentiation and its counterpart of transsexuality, as well as the practices regarding cultural differentiation and its counterpart, transvestism.

At the beginning of the story Savviuqtaalik, the eponym, has the sex of a male, the identity and clothing of a man. But he wants to change his sex when his name-soul transmigrates to the body of a woman.

Once he becomes a fetus, he retains the sex of a male and a male identity during his life in the womb, but he still harbours the desire to change sex.. This wish comes true during the birth process; the fetus reaches first for the tools symbolic of his own sex, the man’s knife and harpoon, but then he remembers the unpleasantness of the hunter’s life and decides to become a woman, replacing the men’s tools and instead grabbing the female tools, the lamp and the semi-circular knife, before exiting. This act then sets off a chain reaction. His penis retracts and his perineum splits vertically, giving way to a vulva, the mark of her new





femaleness. Yet his identity remains male, despite this transexualization, and his social sex or gender will remain male until puberty, expressed through total transvestism, and initiation and participation in male production activities. Iqallijuq considers herself a man, dresses as a man and hunts with the men. With the complicity of the group and hidden behind the identity of her dead eponym, as she had been previously behind the name Iqallijuq, she crosses through childhood sheltered from all the dangers that might threaten her.

Puberty marks a new and decisive stage in the acquisition of her adult sex. At her first menstruation, her mother sews her for the first time the clothing of a young woman. But the transition is not easy. Iqallijuq reacts violently and cuts the tail off the woman's coat so as to remain a man, but finally gives in and Nuvvijaq bursts into tears; she does not want her father wearing women's clothing. So while Savvuiqталik has done everything possible to be reborn as a woman, his daughter Nuvvijaq and little namesake try to delay the moment and to keep the girl's new biological sex hidden. But menstrual blood cannot be hidden, it has too many implications for the social reproduction of the group. A newly menstruating girl must make the rounds of the households in the village, and in each, she is offered something to drink – the same as a newborn child or a freshly killed marine mammal. A little earlier Ujaraq, with whom Iqallijuq lived, had killed his first caribou and so been given his first men's clothing, although he had been dressed as a girl since birth as a result of his female identity and female social sex, as his family maintained.

In both cases, we see the symbolic death of the eponym, and the readjustment of the individual personality of the homonym who has become an adult and thus independent, so as to align the biological sex with the social one. Iqallijuq was now capable of reproduction and Ujarak capable of production, and so a new cycle began. She would keep her male identity throughout her life but now she had a female personality in accordance with the desire of her ancestor. Ujarak would retain a female identity but with a male personality. It was also at puberty that young women were tattooed, marking their femaleness indelibly on the visible parts of their bodies, although Iqallijuq escaped this ritual due to the arrival of the missionaries.

Reliance on game

As we saw earlier, animal flesh is one of the constituent components of the fetus and by extension, of the living human being (*Inuk*), as for him it represented the ideal food. However, according to Inuit theory, animals possess shadow-souls (*tarniq*) as well as the name-souls of their species, the latter escape the body and are reincarnated when the animal is killed, but unlike humans where the bodies are abandoned and the names





recovered for transmission to a newborn, the meat of a slain animal is recovered and the bones are discarded.

The Inuit developed a set of behaviours and beliefs around this dependence, many of which are illustrated in Iqallijuq's story. First there were the very strict proscriptions that prohibited contact between a woman when she was bleeding and raw animal flesh. The woman had to have the meat cut by someone else and she was only allowed to eat it cooked; this was the case with Nuvvijaq shortly after the birth of Iqallijuq.

Then there are the dual rituals of putting the newborn in contact with game, as something both to hunt and to consume. Nuvvijaq touches the lips of her infant with meat and broth, and the child is instantly satisfied. Then she puts bits into a *minguliqtiqtiqarvik*, symbolically the stomach of the child's eponym, in an effort to create a sort of social contract with the animal species. To this end, after a year has passed she will empty the contents of the little pouch into the sea and the pieces will return as animals that will later be happy to be killed by the child become hunter.

Iqallijuq and the myth of Arnakpaktuq

Before I return to the issue of the genre of Iqallijuq's story, I need to talk about a myth that is well-known in Igloolik, the myth of Arnakpaktuq. It describes the transmigration through six species of animals of the name-soul of a woman who is unhappy because her husband mistreats her. But she cannot find happiness in the animal species she visits and so chooses to reincarnate in the body of a boy, her own brother's son.

This myth has some analogies to the story of Iqallijuq, although the symmetry is reversed, as it's a woman who wants to change sex and so finally enters the uterus of her brother's wife, exiting as a male. Later in the myth, the child recounts his memories from the womb, and becomes one of the great hunters as a result of the knowledge of animals species he gained during his various metamorphoses.

An origin myth of hunting knowledge, Arnakpaktuq is also the myth that establishes the relationship between hunter and game, and so rules out metamorphoses between humans and game. And finally, the myth establishes the concept of identity related to 'name' and the transmigration or reincarnation system of the name-soul. By means of this system, the woman gains access to maleness, either by asking to be reborn in a male body or by recalling an earlier existence in a man's body. The myth and the story are mutually reinforcing, the first establishing the conditions for the production and credibility of the second, and the second transposing the myth into experiential life.





Now we can better understand how Iqallijuq's recollections are not really an individual saga, a personal myth or an exemplary anamnesis, but instead are more a process of identification carried out through a mythic anamnesis that already clearly existed as a cultural construct, as a narrative Genre, part of the Inuit Cosmology expressing an astonishing likeness with proto-taoïst Cosmology (Saladin d'Anglure 2015)

Adapted (2015) by the Author from **Saladin d'Anglure**, Bernard (1977). *Études Inuit Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 33-63, translated in English by Robyn Bryant

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