

The 'Third Gender' of the Inuit

Bernard Saladin d'Anglure

At a time when western societies seem to have lost their markers, once found in sexual life, in gender relationships, in the sexual division of tasks, in standard definitions of the individual and the person, of family and kin, at a time, too, when they are bending under the weight of an exponential build-up of texts, theories and scientific discoveries, as ephemeral as they are brilliant, in the life sciences as well as in history, it is good to take time out to go and examine an indigenous society which, only fifty years ago, was still living from hunting, trapping, fishing and gathering. The people in this instance are the Inuit (as they name themselves, literally meaning: 'the real humans').

This society, which apparently retains no history and draws its knowledge from oral traditions handed down by the elders, as well as from experience of the natural world gained during childhood and adolescence under the attentive direction of the adults of the group, has derived and put into practice a theory of the individual and the person, of sex and of gender, of kinship and family, which is still capable of astonishing and instructing us.¹

One hundred years ago, Michel Mauss, the founding father of French anthropology, devoted a two-year course at the *École Pratique des Hautes Études* (5th section, Sciences of Religion)² to the social structures of the Inuit. From their example, though without ever having studied them in the field, he had come to the conclusion that the life of all societies oscillates between two poles, an individualist pole and a 'communist' pole (in the sense that this term was still being given at the beginning of the 20th century); he postulated that this dualism, articulated around the dualism of the seasons, marked the totality of the social, economic and religious life of a people. What he did not perceive was that behind this dualism was hidden another, the dualism of the sexes, which served as the conceptual framework for all the rest. The state of knowledge was insufficient at that time to allow this latter aspect to emerge. What Mauss had not been able to detect either, was that this dualism which he had uncovered was in fact integrated into a threefold system, involving a third element which straddled the boundary between the two others and

Copyright © ICPHS 2005

SAGE: London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi, <http://dio.sagepub.com>

DOI: 10.1177/0392192105059478

fulfilled a mediatory function between them. It is this third element which I propose to designate by the expression 'the third gender'.³

Nevertheless, certain of Mauss's anthropologist contemporaries such as Frazer (1907) or Marett (1914) had realized that 'religious transvestism' and 'change of sex' had a mediatory function on the religious plane. Sternberg (1925) would give further support to this explanation some years later, but two major theories were soon to obscure it. On the one hand, Marxism, based on its evolutionist presuppositions, saw in this adoption of cross-gender dress a residue of the primitive matriarchal social order (a theory now regarded as obsolete). On the other, Freudianism, which also carried evolutionist presuppositions, had difficulty in conceptualizing sexuality as anything other than a dualism, and in particular of thinking of social sex (or gender) functions apart from through the conceptual framework of sexuality. And this despite efforts made by Freudian dissidents like Jung who reconfigured the question by projecting that the duality was found within each individual (*animus/anima*).

But let's return to the Inuit, and to a brief initial review of certain myths, beliefs, rituals and practices which mutually establish fields of meaning, as through an interplay of mirror images. In this I will be relying on my own research undertaken since the middle of the 1950s in the central Canadian Arctic (Nunavik and Nunavut), on my discussions with Alaskan Inuit, and on other data drawn from the ethnological literature.

A 'strange man' in woman's dress gives birth to a whale

There is a myth from St Lawrence Island in the Bering Strait, part of Alaska and inhabited by the Yupiit, an Inuit people of the area. This myth tells an exemplary tale, when the relationships between sexual identity, the sex-based division of tasks, whale hunting and procreation are all brought together. Here is the story as recorded and transcribed by Grace Slwooko (1979).

For us, in the Eskimos' belief, there is another sex between man and woman. / . . . /Inuit here in this area of Siberia and St Lawrence have great consideration for this kind of person because he can't help his nature.

When a man with a moustache is dressed like a woman, we are careful not to make fun of him, as instructed by our elders. The elders would say that such people were protected by the Maker of All. So to laugh at him would bring a curse to the thoughtless ones. So when we see a man dress like a woman he is showing respect to his nature and we are not to laugh at him or hurt his feelings.

So there was one like that in this story. The man in this story dressed like a woman and never wanted to go hunting, but stayed home and sewed. He was the eldest of four brothers. It happened that the younger men, when they got whales and walrus out on the ice and sea, would get upset about meat taken to the eldest brother who didn't go out hunting at all. The younger brothers would complain, 'Why do we have to take meat to our eldest brother when he doesn't work out on the cold moving ice and sea like us?'

When the strange-acting man heard about this, he went out to the shore. He buried his face in his parky sleeves and the large ruff, which were made like women's clothing, and cried because the brothers hurt his feelings. There he cried and cried. Soon a voice was heard asking, 'Why is the woman crying?' It was the voice of the Maker of All. In answer, the strange man said, 'My brothers complained about me not being out on the ice and sea with them at the hunts. I am unable to go. I can't! I can't! I am like a woman. How can I

when I'm made like this?' He sobbed on as he poured out his grief. So the voice answered, 'All right, I'll see to it that you'll get something.' So, very much comforted, the strange man went home. It wasn't long when he felt that he was getting big like a woman that was going to have a baby! He got bigger. Boy, the poor strange man was frightened. 'If I'm going to have a baby, how will it ever be delivered?' he moaned to himself. But the voice soon talked to him again asking, 'Why is the woman crying again?' For an answer, the strange man asked, 'If I'm going to have a baby, how is it going to be delivered?' – 'You go down to the sea and bury your face in your sleeves and ruff and rest there on the sea. You won't sink.' The voice answered. So the strange man hurried down to the sea in his parky made like that of the women and got on the sea and buried his face with his sleeves and large ruff made of black dog skin. This was the women's original parky. There he floated around as he cried. Somehow a little whale was born. When his baby was born, it was not like the humans. Instead, it was a little whale.

The strange man picked up the tiny whale and took it home. He loved it so dearly that he carved a large wooden bowl and put water in it for the whale to swim in. The whale was getting big fast so that in no time he had to carve another bowl. When the whale got too large to be kept in the house, the man took him to the sea. He stayed at the waves for some time. While he was at the waves, the little whale would come ashore many time to be with his mother. When he was grown up, the strange man made a marker for his son. He made holes at his nose and put a reddened baby seal skin on his nose to mark him. So the little whale would play out in the sea. There were times when he got as far as the horizon. He got to going so far away that he would bring another whale along when he came home. So the younger brothers of the strange man would go out and kill the one he brought. He brought home many whales and the brothers were getting rich. The people of the village also became good whalers because the whales which followed the man's special whale given him by the Maker of All. They were not short of meat and oil. They had plenty of bones for housing poles and for other uses. That was the way the strange man was comforted.

Then one day, his whale didn't come home. The strange man waited at the shore very anxiously and he was very worried. He waited and waited, but no whale came. Another day passed, with still no sign of his whale. Then finally he got into his parka and buried his face in his sleeves and the large ruff and cried. He cried and cried, and soon he heard a voice asking why the woman was crying. The strange man poured out his sorrow in answer. So the voice said to him, 'You go out to the sea in your parky as you always do until you stop but you will still be moving.' The man did as he was told. Out there on the ocean he moved along but he did not see where he was going. When he stopped moving, he got his head up from his parka and what a strange place he was coming to! Where was He? The strange man wondered and tried to figure out. Soon he found out that he was coming to a different village. As soon he came to the coast he skipped along to the shore. He walked up to the beach. At the beach, what tragedy met his eyes! There was the marked head of his son! Just the head. Where was his body? In vain he ran around the large head to see the body, but it was gone. His son was killed! He could see that there was a village close by. He followed the path to a house. When he got there, he found out that it was the home of a crew that got his son. The people were getting together there to tell stories to celebrate the event or honor the catch. The people humbly welcomed the strange man and asked him a story to tell as they were doing to show their thankfulness for a great event that had been given to them. The strange man replied, 'I am coming to tell a story for I certainly have one. He started, 'There is a man who was born to be unable to go hunting for whales and all animals like others do. When he was accused, he cried to the Maker of All and he was given a strange and powerful son, a whale. What a heart lifter he was. He got many whales for the village so the man, or his parent, was not helpless anymore. Very proudly he raised his son. He was a joy to him. So he put a marker on him, a beautiful piece of work on him, a reddened baby sealskin of great prize. To the parent's great sorrow,

however, his son was killed when the poor ambitious child got too far from home. They should have left him alone as he had markings, but they have killed him anyway. This is a tragedy to his parents. That is my story.' With this, the sorrowing mother left the place in tears. There was a terrible silence after he left. The people tried to understand what he meant and they thought about killing a whale with reddened skin on his nose.

A terrible and horrible thing happened after the strange man left the place. The crew of the boat that killed the whale with the reddened baby seal skin on its nose started to sweat! The men sweated and sweated. Terrified by their appearance, the men looked at each other. They got smaller and smaller until they all turned to liquid. (They say that every time someone got a seal or some other animal which looked strange, usually some sorrow would come to the family that happened to get it. I guess this was because that animal was marked as belonging to someone and that it should never have been killed.)

What do we learn from this myth? Firstly, that the 'strange man', as he is referred to in the story, is the eldest of five brothers. Now it is frequent in families where the sex ratio between the children is this unbalanced that one of them takes on the role of a desired child of the opposite sex. In Alaska I had the good fortune to meet a Yupik woman from the Siberian side of the Bering Strait who was the eldest of four daughters but who had been brought up as a boy to learn all the arts of hunting, which she had practised for a long time to assist her father. This role-swapping is also very common among the Inuit of Nunavut and Nunavik. The same thing happens in inverse symmetric fashion among families with exclusively male offspring.

Added to this, in the end quite functional, rationale is very often another, more cosmological one. Every child receives at their birth one or several names that had belonged to recently deceased members of his or her kin-group; but since Inuit personal names have no gender association, they can be transmitted indifferently to a boy or a girl. The soul of the deceased appears to the parents-to-be in a dream to indicate their desire to live again through the child coming to birth. If the sex of the deceased turns out not to correspond with that of the new-born infant, then this latter is dressed as the opposite sex and addressed as if he or she were the reincarnated ancestor. The child is thus socialized among the opposite gender. It may be supposed that this was the situation of the 'strange man', for not only does he wear women's clothing but he is unwilling to go whale hunting with his brothers and instead takes up sewing back in the family dwelling, like a woman.

This moreover causes problems, notably with the youngest of the brothers, who is furious that he has to share with his eldest brother his part of the meat taken when the latter has refused to go on the hunt. The ill-will comes from the fact that among the Inuit, all adult males of an encampment must take part in the hunt if they are to receive a share of the meat. It is at this point in the tale that there emerges the cosmological dimension of the eldest brother's gender swap and reverse socialization when the 'Great Spirit' [the spirit of Sila, the air] speaks to him, calling him 'woman' and promising him a gift. We might presume that this would be part of the meat from the hunt, but on the contrary, it is a foetus. It needs to be mentioned here that the spirit of Sila is the lord of life and the movement of the universe. But as the 'strange man' is not a real woman, he receives neither a human foetus nor a share in the meat of the hunt, but a whale foetus. His female aspect situates him on the side of those who give life, but the male part of him means that he will give birth to a prey animal.

In order to better understand the symbolism of this whale birth, let us consider a ritual practised among the Inuit of Iglulik (in the Nunavut region of Canada). When an adolescent girl who is also identified as female menstruates for the first time, she is sent around each of the dwellings of the encampment with a skin pouch. Each time she goes into a dwelling a little water is poured into her pouch accompanied by the words, 'Well done, you have a son!' In this way, the first menstrual blood, the sign that the girl was now fertile, is assimilated to the notion of having borne a child. On the other hand, when the girl has been given a male identity and in consequence has adopted male clothing, at the onset of her first menstruation she is told, 'Well done, you have cut up your first whale!', implying, you are a great hunter. The bearing of a son and the killing and cutting up of a whale are thus symbolically equivalent. The 'strange man' who gives birth to a whale calf is hence in an inversely symmetrical position to the girl given male identity who has menstruated for the first time. It is expected of a woman that she bring forth future hunters and of a man that he kill prey animals so as to feed his family. But in the myth the 'strange man' gives birth to a 'special' whale which will attract other whales to the shoreline which then will become prey for his brothers.

In fact, the role of the 'strange man' equates exactly to that of the shaman, the mediator who, by straddling the boundary between sexes and gender roles was also capable of straddling all boundaries, between the world of humans and that of animals, between the dead and the living. Moreover, it is attested among the Yupiit of Alaska that the gender swapping of a child was often the prelude to becoming a shaman. In northeastern Siberia, where the Yupiit live next to the Chukchis, shaman gender-crossing is attested as well. I have gathered information there from several sources describing the assumption by a male shaman of a cross-gender identity when he was about to perform traditional ritual. I have also had a certain success in verifying the hypothesis that, among the Inuit of Nunavut, gender-identity swapping in an adolescent often opened up the path to becoming a shaman as an adult, and that the male or female shaman materially or symbolically changed gender as determined by a guiding spirit of the other sex by whom they were assisted (cf. Sternberg, 1925).

Itijjuaq (big anus), the useless orphan girl becomes the first healer

Itijjuaq (big anus), according to my informant Iqallijuq, was the first healer. She is also found under a slightly different name, Itirsiut, which form is also constructed from the root *itiq*, meaning 'anus', in a myth from Cumberland Sound published by Boas in 1901. Rasmussen (1929) doesn't mention it, but he makes reference to beliefs that are associated with several episodes of the myth, as it appears in the following text:

Human beings have always been afraid of sickness, and far back in the very earliest times there arose wise men who tried to find out about all the things none could understand. There were no shamans in those days, and the men were ignorant of all those rules of life which have since taught them to be on their guard against danger and wickedness. The first amulet that ever existed was the shell portion of a sea-urchin. It has a hole through it, and is hence called *itiq* (anus) and the fact of its being made the first amulet was due to its being associated with a particular power of healing. (Rasmussen, 1929 :110)

Why did Rasmussen's informants not relate to him the myth of Itijjuaq, 'big anus', which was still well known among the Iglulik Inuit, while he was establishing and illustrating the above commentaries? At least one person was still bearing this name at the time when Rasmussen travelled through the region, and who was hence giving new life to the myth through having this very name. Perhaps this silence was due to the rather salacious form of the tale. Or else to its 'feminist' aspect, which may have challenged the rather puritanical ways of thinking which were prevalent in the West at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries and from which the nascent field of anthropology was not exempt, expurgating myths before their publication as it did, as can be observed in the earlier works of F. Boas (1888, 1901). Or else perhaps it could be 'masculine thinking' which explains the 'forgetting' of this myth by the male informants, in particular the great shamans, and through the fact that the anthropologists who were interested in the mythology of the Inuit of the Central and Eastern Arctic were almost exclusively men. Here is the story as told to me by Iqallijuq (1977, 1979):

Itijjuaq, 'big anus', could neither scrape skins, nor cut them to shape for making into clothes, nor sew. Nor was she capable of having children. But she benefited from the protection of her deceased grandparents, who while still alive had been very attached to her and who, after their death, brought to her an understanding of things. [Thanks to this gift], she set out to look for an assisting spirit, and, having found a sea-urchin shell (*itijjaq*) on the shoreline, she made an amulet from it by drawing out [its power] through the opening and so became a shaman. She became able to cure the sick by farting in their direction. She had two husbands, who both loved her, and whom she also loved greatly. They hunted caribou, and she never lacked for food. She cured one of her husbands when he fell sick, then one of his brothers and several members of his family. The people heard of this and began to seek her help when they were ill. In return, they scraped the skins of the caribou brought back by their husbands, cut them to shape and sewed them, thus making for her and her husbands fine jackets and beautiful coats. She was also given children in adoption. But one arrogant man, who had two wives, began to hate her without any reason, because she could not do anything and, even though having two husbands, she was good for nothing. One day when her husbands were away on a hunt, he entered her dwelling and killed her with a blow to the head. Then he went off to get some walrus meat from one of his store-pits in anticipation of the prohibition against all such activities when a death has been observed. But, as he came back past her house, he saw her calling out to him: 'Me too, Me too, I want a share of the meat!' Dropping his load, he went over to her and once again killed her by clubbing her on the head, then he blocked up the doorway and entrance porch of her igloo with snow. But, when he went off, there she was again standing, calling out to him in the same manner. Without going back to her again, and keeping his back turned to her, he went back to his own house. But hardly had he gone inside when he was seized with a violent headache, and lay down in his bed. During the evening, as his illness became worse, one of his wives went with a gift (*tunijjuti*) to Itijjuaq, begging her to come and cure her husband. Itijjuaq went to his bedside and began to sing to him: 'Here is the great man, here is what happened yesterday when in broad daylight he rained blows on the head of Itijjuaq, but the blows have come back on his own head.' Then she went away and he died. The one who had struck the blows to her head was dead.

Scraping skins to remove fat residues from them; setting them to dry by stretching them on the ground with wooden or bone pegs; rubbing them with a smooth

stone to make them supple, cutting them with a half-moon-shaped knife (*ulu*) after measuring the appropriate lengths with hands and fingers; finally, sewing them with thread made from caribou tendons and a bone or ivory needle . . . these were some of the tasks that a marriageable woman should be able to perform. Not to be able to would mean the woman would remain unmarried, dependent on the community and subject to its disfavour. So how can this lack of socialization on the part of Itijjuaq be explained? Iqallijuq, in her commentary, explained that the heroine of the story had lost her parents when still very young and had been taken in by her grandparents, but they were themselves very deprived and died when she was still quite young. Kupaaq, the son-in-law of the female narrator, stated that she had to go and beg her food from the neighbours. Itijjuaq was also barren; a further handicap for a young woman, who risked being relegated to the role of second spouse, if, that is, any man was still prepared to have her.

Clairvoyance (*qaumaniq*), on the other hand, was a highly prized gift. It is known that, in shamanism, it constitutes one of the first stages towards the acquiring of shamanic powers. This faculty may come as a consequence of serious illness, of a grievous family loss, or from some accident or distressing psychological circumstance. The solitary destitution of the little orphan girl was definitely a propitious condition for attaining a clairvoyant state, though not in itself sufficient. This is where the assistance of the deceased grandparents came into play. In the traditional process of learning to be a shaman, which is known through information gained from shamans themselves by early ethnographers, or as directly reported by former shamans, when the postulant has attained clairvoyance, a luminous aura emanates from his or her body, attracting numerous guiding spirits (*tuurngait*) who are seeking a shaman with whom to associate. In the related story, her clairvoyance will lead Itijjuaq to the shoreline and have her pick up the sea-urchin shell, bring it to her mouth, draw in the air inside it and so discover the power that she can derive from it.

To understand what this power consists of, we must come back to the spirit of Sila (the surrounding air), named Naarjuk ('great belly') in the shaman language, the spirit of the universe. The breaths exhaled from the body are associated with the air which surrounds the souls of all living creatures, encapsulated in a bubble the size of an egg which is lodged in the body near the groin. This air has been taken from the atmosphere on the day of birth and is thus directly linked to Naarjuk. The form of the sea-urchin's empty shell recalls that of the bubble; according to the Inuit, the star-shaped marking it carries resembles an anus, hence the name given to the urchin shell: *itijjuaq* ('anus-like'); the air inside, when breathed in, is considered to have the power to cure illness and restore physical disorders.

The sea-urchin is found in Arctic waters, notably in polynya zones where the combined effects of tides and marine currents keeps certain stretches of water ice-free throughout the whole winter. In some territories, like the Belcher Islands of Hudson's Bay or in the region of Inukjuak, the Inuit gather and eat them. But elsewhere it is mainly the empty shell of the sea-urchin that the Inuit occasionally find along the shoreline. The power discovered by Itijjuaq is thus that of the physical emanations of air from the body through exhalation and flatulence, activated by the possession of a sea-urchin shell whose air she has breathed in.

Ijituuq, an Inuk from the Iglulik group, told me that when he was a child his

shaman grandfather had given him a sea-urchin shell as an amulet to protect him from danger: when he needed this protection he was to squeeze the shell in his left hand (the hand used by shamans in their rituals) and fart in the direction of the danger. One day, finding himself face to face with a polar bear, he wanted to use his amulet, but was too frightened to, preferring instead to take to his heels.

The early data gathered from Inuit informants agrees that the fart (*niliq*) was considered to have a curative power, whether it be that published by Rasmussen or that gathered by Comer (Boas, 1901). Rasmussen wrote:

When a man fell ill, one would go and sit by him, and, pointing to the diseased part, break wind behind. The one went outside, while another held one hand hollowed over the diseased part, breathing at the same time out over the palm of his other hand in a direction away from the person to be cured. It was then believed that wind and breath together combined all the power emanating from within the human body, a power so mysterious and strong that it was able to cure disease. (Rasmussen, 1929 :110).

The paradoxical nature of the character Itijuaq in the myth is here fully apparent. Whereas no man in the traditional society would have married a woman incapable of sewing and bearing children, the story says that she had two husbands, which was very unusual among the Inuit. In 1921–4, on the Fifth Thule Expedition which took him right across all the territories occupied by the Inuit, Knud Rasmussen uncovered no more than two examples of women having two husbands. When I asked the elders about these cases of polyandry, they replied with embarrassed smiles that, in the case they were aware of, the two husbands shared the same bed as their wife, in the same igloo, something which the elders thought totally incongruous. In her commentary on the myth, Iqallijuq insisted on the fact that Itijuaq's two husbands were both very much in love with her. They went off on distant hunting trips after caribou and brought her back large quantities of meat. Polygamy, on the other hand, did exist, but was traditionally reserved for men of a higher social rank than average, either because they were expert hunters capable of sustaining a large family, or that they were shamans, or else individuals endowed with relatively rare skills, such as being a great singer capable of both composing an original repertoire of songs and of winning the singing contest.

The successes of Itijuaq as a healer explain the relationships she had with her husbands: she had cured one of them, says the myth. Her reputation soon spread beyond the kin-group. She thus acquired an authority rarely conceded to a woman outside the group of women elders, and all the more surprising in that she was an orphan. Herein lies the key to her success. The exceptional nature of her powers allowed her to compensate for her inability to participate in the normal economic process of her social group which was based on the sexual division of labour. This also compensated for her inability to have children, because her patients, to thank her, offered her their own children in adoption. It is known that, among the Inuit, around 40 percent of children were adopted, but most often with families linked by ties of kinship to the original family. Her services were so appreciated that the other women scraped for her the skins of the caribou killed by their husbands, cut them to shape and made her very fine clothes of the type usually reserved for the families of the 'great men'.

Whilst all was going well for Itijjuaq, with her husbands, her family and her neighbours, an implacable opposition to her arose on the part of the 'Great Man' of the tribal group; he was a man with two wives and had an absolute scorn for the inability of the healer to fulfil her domestic role as a woman. He had not made use of her services and considered her useless. In reality, the man was jealous of Itijjuaq's reputation and the rank that her power as a healer was conferring on her. He saw this as an affront to his own authority and rank as *isumataq* ('astute man') or as *angajuqqaq* ('chief'). He therefore decided to kill her, and, taking advantage of her two husbands' absence, he put this into effect. But he extended this enormity to the point of then going to obtain provisions of meat, to pre-empt the prohibition on working which would be decreed as soon as the death had been observed by someone. Tradition required that no work should be done for four days after the death of a woman and for three days in the case of a man.

But, against all expectation, the powers of Itijjuaq and the assistance of the deceased who were protecting her provided her with a protective shield, and when the 'Great Man' passed by her igloo, she was found once again standing at the entrance, showing no trace of the fatal attack that she had suffered. She even taunted her attacker, derisively demanding from him a share of the meat he was bringing back. Beside himself with rage, the 'great man', more determined than ever to be rid of her, clubbed her to death once more there and then, and walled her up in her snow igloo. But nothing could defeat the powers of Itijjuaq, who continued to call out mockingly to her aggressor. Physical strength had no effect on shamanic powers. This time, the 'great man', totally disconcerted and impotent, gave up the contest and returned to his dwelling where, ill and demoralized, he took to his bed. The harm he had sought to do her had turned back against himself.

One of the 'Great Man's' wives, alarmed at the state her husband was in, decided to send for Itijjuaq to try and heal him. She went to visit her, bringing her the special gift as required by such circumstances. It was a type of ritual offering, intended for the spirit who assisted the healer, so as to propitiate it and so ensure the healing. Itijjuaq thereupon went to her attacker's bedside, only to observe that his attitude had not changed. She therefore began to compose a chant in which she related the misdeeds of the sick man against her, then left him to die, a victim of his own hatred . . .

If one examines closely this strange figure of Itijjuaq, who occupies a genuinely in-between status in relation to the sexual division of tasks and also the social division of gender categories, one finds that her originality comes from her discovery and appropriation of shamanism, which enabled her to be recognized as the first woman healer. This status transcended the sexual division of tasks. She is not a huntress, the other model found in Inuit society, but her success is expressed through polyandry in an essentially monogamous society but which is dominated by polygamist 'great men'. The hatred of the 'great man' towards her is not fortuitous, for she represents a veritable female counter-power within a society controlled by the male-dominant attitudes of the 'great men'. Her invulnerability to the blows of her attacker finally established the supremacy of the shamanic powers, even when wielded by a woman, over those of the 'great men'.

The third gender of the Inuit

We have with this second myth a type of echo of the previous myth, but within a female mode. Each after their own fashion, the two main characters straddle the gender boundary and engage in a mediatory role which is inaccessible to ordinary people: Itijuaq as mediator between Naarjuk, the spirit of the surrounding air, the force of the universe and of life, and the unwell bodies of humans; the 'strange man' as mediator between the hunters and their principal prey, the Arctic whale. Both characters express different but complementary aspects of Inuit shamanism.

Furthermore, in real life it was not rare for a male shaman to take a female shaman for a wife; and the Inuit had understood that a boy with female gender-identity was the ideal companion for a girl with male gender-identity. In such cases they strove to pair them up by betrothing them to each other from the birth of the baby girl, retaining an age difference of two to three years.

Dressing these children in opposite-sex clothing lasted normally until puberty. It was then time for the boy to shed his plaits and his female garments and kill his first large prey. For the girl, as soon as her menstrual flow appeared, she had to take on female clothes again, have her face and part of her body tattooed and prepare herself for domestic life as a wife and mother. This transition created genuine crises of identity, which opened the way for the emergence of a shamanic vocation. At all events, the personalities of the two adolescents remained marked for life by their previous social gender reversal. They would remain in fact still symbolically cross-gendered, even if not openly, through the kinship terms that they continued to be called by and which were those that in the past had been used for their deceased namesakes of the opposite sex.

*

Let me conclude this brief overview of Inuit culture by observing that, for the Inuit, the sexes and genders, as with scales of sizes, do not have rigid boundaries. It is still thought that a foetus can change sex at the moment of birth, and the term *sipiniit* is applied to those who do thus change sex, for one reason or another. This theme is present in a certain number of 'intra-uterine' memories which I have collected over the years in various parts of the Inuit Arctic, as it is also in several myths.⁴ It is further believed that a mistreated child can become a giant thirsting for revenge, or that a polar bear can be changed into an Arctic fox if a menstruating woman looks at it, and that a dwarf can become the size of his opponent. The Inuit have a great deal to teach us and to assist us to discover in our own culture. Do not we ourselves, often unknowingly, create a social third sex? It might well be thought so when we recall that at the beginning of the 1980s the famous pop band 'Indochine' popularised this notion with its song 'the third sex' which spoke of feminine boys and masculine girls.

Bernard Saladin d'Anglure
Anthropology, Laval University, Quebec
Translated from the French by Colin Anderson

Notes

1. See the place accorded to them in Godelier (2004).
2. Mauss (1979).
3. If one sets aside the usage of this designation by Plato and by Christian theology, the expression 'third gender' was used for the first time, it seems, by Karl Heinrich Ulrich in the 19th century to refer to homosexuals. It was reused in the same sense by Edward Carpenter and Magnus Hirschfeld at the beginning of the 20th century. The anthropologist Robert Ranulph Marett was apparently the first to use it to designate transvestite Siberian shamans (see Marett 1914). Nicole-Claude Mathieu (1971) makes reference to a 'social third sex (troisième sexe social)' in relation to Amerindian 'berdaches'. For my purposes I have proposed using the expression 'third gender' without any reference to specific sexual orientation in order to designate the social construction of gender identity, in association with the belief structures, the interchanged socialization practices and family sex ratios as observed among the Inuit. See Saladin d'Anglure (1992) and (1986). See also Herdt (1994).
4. See on this subject Saladin d'Anglure (1977) and (forthcoming).

References

- Boas, F. (1901) 'The Eskimo of Baffin Land and Hudson Bay', *Bulletin of American Museum of Natural History* 15(I), New York.
- Czaplicka, M. (1914) *Aboriginal Siberia: A Study in Social Anthropology*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Frazer, J. (1907) *Adonis, Attis, Oziris, Studies in the History of Oriental Religion*. London: Macmillan.
- Godelier, M. (2004) *Métamorphoses de la parenté [Metamorphoses of Kinship]*. Paris: Fayard.
- Herdt, G., ed. (1996) *Third Sex, Third Gender: Beyond Sexual Dimorphism in Culture and History*. New York: Zone Books.
- Iqallijuq, R. (1977, 1979) *Entretiens inédits en langue inuit, enregistrés par B. Saladin d'Anglure [Unpublished conversations in the Inuit language, recorded by B. Saladin d'Anglure]*.
- Marett, R. (1914) 'Introduction', in Czaplicka (1914).
- Mathieu, N.C. (1971) 'Notes pour une définition sociologique des catégories de sexe' [Notes for a sociological definition of sex categories], *Epistémologie sociologique*, septembre: 1–39.
- Mauss, M. with H. Beuchat (1979) *Seasonal Variations of the Eskimo: A Study in Social Morphology* (1906), translated with a Foreword by James Fox. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Rasmussen, K. (1929) *Intellectual Culture of the Iglulik Eskimos*. Report of the Fifth Thule Expedition, 1921–24, vol. VII. Copenhagen.
- Saladin d'Anglure, B. (1977) 'Iqallijuq, ou les réminiscences d'une âme-nom inuit' [Iqallijuq, or the reminiscences of an Inuit soul-name], *Études Inuit / Inuit Studies* 1(1): 33–63.
- Saladin d'Anglure, B. (1986) 'Du fœtus au chaman, la construction d'un troisième sexe inuit' [From the fœtus to the shaman, the construction of an Inuit third sex], *Études Inuit / Inuit Studies* 10(1–2): 25–113.
- Saladin d'Anglure, B. (1992) 'Le troisième sexe' [The third sex], *La Recherche*, no. 245: 836–44.
- Saladin d'Anglure, B. (forthcoming) *Être et renaître Inuit, homme, femme ou chamane*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Slwooko G. (1979) *Sivuuqam unqipaghaatangi II. Saint-Lawrence Island Legends*. From stories written by G. Slwooko, illustrated by J. L. Boffa, Anchorage, National Bilingual Materials Development Center, Rural Education Affairs, University of Alaska.
- Sternberg, L. (1925) 'Divine Election in Primitive Religion', *Congrès International des Américanistes, Compte-rendu de la XXIème session tenue à Göteborg en 1924*, Göteborg Museum.