

Medicine man makes walrus tusk melt before spell bound audience

by Howard Rock

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Great silence settled in the spacious galgee (community gathering hall) as Unaliq prepared to perform. Someone swallowed and it could be heard clearly.

The ahngatkuq (medicine man) began his quiet chant in weird intonations. As he progressed, a huge walrus tusk undulated rhythmically in his hands as if it was dancing in ethereal atmosphere. The tusk was moved so skillfully, it seemed alive.

Chief Attungowruk sat in his accustomed seat in the back center of the huge room. He was paying rapt attention on the medicine man as the latter intoned in eerie volumes.

The flames of six large whale oil lamps flickered restlessly. They seemed to be in perfect harmony with the performance in progress.

An Invitation

The day before, Chief Attungowruk and Unaliq had met on the north beach by chance. Unaliq was a valued friend of the Chief. They had chatted amiably. The medicine man was about ten years older than his friend who was around 29 years old at the time.

"Unaliq, fall time is always the dull time of year," the Chief had said, "and not much is going on as usual. How would you like to come to our galgee tomorrow night and show us some of your new accomplishments in the arts of ahngatkuqs?"

Unaliq smiled modestly before answering.

"Ahngnaqon (Cousin), I have been concentrating on one for quite some time now and I think I have it just about perfected. If you wish, I'll do what I can to convince you and the people you invite."

The two men were cousins three times removed but their relationship was as if they were first cousins.

"That is very good, Unaliq," Attungowruk answered. "I'll have my women prepare enough food for about fifty people."

At the time, the Chief of Tikiqaaq (Point Hope) had five wives. When he was murdered in 1885, he had eight, one of which, his first and favorite wife, Qinuwan-na, he murdered by tragic error while under a heavy influence of liquor.

That evening and the next day, the Chief had a young man notify the members of the Qaqmaqtuuq, a northside whaling group which he headed. The other prominent group was the Ungasaqsikaq, the south group. These groups were more or less friendly rivals that sought to outdo the other in whales caught.

Crowd Gathers

People began to gather for Unaliq's performance of the evening. Food was brought into the galgee by Attungowruk's wives and other women. There was muktuk and qorq (frozen whale meat), boiled caribou, walrus and oogruk meats.

There was a festive mood among the people as they ate and the interior of the galgee hummed with multiple conversations interspersed with easy laughter. When the meal was just over, Attungowruk announced in a loud voice:

"Before my ahngnaqon begins his performance tonight, Tingmeak will tell us a short legend about a person who was invited by Allingnaq, the dweller of the moon."

Tingmeak, a white-haired old man, told the legend in a colorful and dramatic manner. He was one of the Chief's favorite storytellers and he had told many of them in Attungowruk's own sod igloo.

Quiet Audience

The audience was quiet during Tingmeak's rendition of the legend. When he finished, there were remarks of approval and then silence settled once again as the crowd became expectant of Unaliq's performance.

"And now, my people, ahngnaqatiga (my cousin) is going to perform his magic," Attungowruk said in a moderate voice but which seemed loud in the quietness of the galgee.

"I don't know what he is going to show us tonight but I want everyone of you to watch very closely so you won't miss anything ahngnaqatiga might do. Whatever it is, I know it will be very interesting."

"Tuvra ahsiiin, ahngnaqon, ahngakorquraqiiin." ("And now, my cousin, you may perform your medicine.") Attungowruk directed.

Man Unto Himself

Unaliq, who had been sitting quietly, pensively, hardly noticed his Chief's request. He was a man unto himself. He seemed detached from the people around him. He rose slowly and walked to the center of the audience. He took his light parka off and tossed it aside. He was naked to the waist.

He sat down on the floor, his legs forming a V in front of him. In his hands was a huge walrus tusk. He was unsmiling. His face was pinched—set—a stern mask. His eyes were narrowed to almost mere slits but the people could not mistake the intense concentration in them.

He was now holding the tusk in both hands as if he was afraid it might escape. All eyes in the galgee stared at him with expectant fascination. He looked down at the tusk intensely—penetratingly.

An awesome stillness settled in the huge room. Someone swallowed nervously and it could be heard in every corner of the galgee.

The Chant

Unaliq began to chant in tiny plaintive sounds as if he was afraid to disturb something that was asleep. He slowly raised the tusk over his head to about forty-five degree angle from his eyes, looking at it intensely—steadily.

His chants began to get gradually louder. They issued forth eerily—weirdly.

After what seemed a lengthy period, Unaliq lowered the tusk to the level of his chest. His eyes never left the object in his hands.

His chant took on a rhythmic sound and he started to undulate the tusk in time with it, very gently at first. The undulating increased until the ivory seemed to move in fluid motions. It was a beautiful, rhythmic scene and it was perfectly coordinated.

As he chanted, Unaliq pulled in his legs carefully and slowly got on his feet. Every movement he made seemed to flow along with his intonations. The smooth, waving motion of the object in his hands continued undisturbed as if the man had not moved, his penetrating eyes continually on it.

Once on his feet, he began to go round slowly to his right as his chant increased gradually in volume. His voice was plaintive—steady and perfectly attuned to the motion of the tusk in his hands.

As he swung his body in measured movements round and round, the people in the audience noticed beads of sweat on his forehead. His face was flushed now but it still had the same intense look of concentration. He was completely oblivious to the people around him.

The ahngatkuq began to perspire profusely and drops of sweat started to fall one by one from his protruded chin onto the floor of the galgee. His torso glistened with the moisture in the flickering light of the whale oil lamps.

The Crescendo

The volume of the plaintive chant increased. Although it was moderately loud, it seemed to swell into great crescendo probably due to the backdrop of awesome silence.

At this point, Unaliq took hold of the walrus tusk at each end without loss to the rhythmic motion. The intensity of this concentration seemed to increase. The crowd sensed that something was about to happen.

Strange Phenomenon

Unaliq had gripped the large root end of the walrus ivory with his right hand and his left hand was on the narrow pointed end. He made a slow twisting motion. In the ensuing moments, a strange thing happened. With the exertion of the force, the ivory tusk began to give. It was twisting perceptively—slowly—as if it had become soft! The blackened natural cracks curved around with the motion.

The medicine man kept up the pressure and the ivory continued to twist until each end was almost completely opposite of its original position—a strange phenomenon indeed!

Unaliq was going round and round all the while, always with rhythmic movements and the audience saw what was happening

every moment of the time. There were audible gasps of surprise from the crowd as it witnessed the bizarre performance.

Chief Attungowruk was as surprised as anyone else and it was reflected on his face in a fierce fascination as well as huge satisfaction. There was an unbelieving smile on his face.

The Solid Clatter

The chant of the medicine man began to decrease in volume. He stopped twisting pressure on the ivory. He now merely held it aloft with the same smoothly undulating movements. The tusk began to retrogress slowly. The blackened cracks along its length could be seen gradually aligning themselves in their original positions.

As the chant slowly died away, the walrus tusk was in its original form. As soon as it happened, Unaliq tossed the tusk gently into the air. It dropped on the floor with a great clatter, see-sawing crazily on its natural curve until it was still.

Exhausted Man

As soon as he tossed the ivory, Unaliq slumped to the floor. His head dropped forward. He was completely exhausted from what must have been a superhuman effort of concentration. He was unaware of the excitement that had erupted in the galgee.

Unable to quite believe what he had seen, Chief Attungowruk came forward and picked up the walrus ivory. He turned it round and round in his hands and inspected it. He took the root end of it in his right hand and pounded the driftwood floor with the rounded point.

The force of the pounding was forceful enough to make indentations on the wooden floor. The sound of the blows resounded in the huge room. He gave the ivory to one of the men in the audience who inspected it.

Almost everyone in the galgee scrutinized the tusk with awe but all they found was its own natural state—solid and real.

Regains Strength

It was some time before Unaliq



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regained his strength. He became his own smiling self once again, although there was a look of exhaustion on his face. He shrugged off the questions of the people politely of how he did the seemingly supernatural performance. Attungowruk was no less curious.

"Ahngnaqon, how did you ever achieve that particular performance?" the Chief asked.

Unaliq smiled politely but didn't say a word for several moments. He had great respect for his Chief and friend, but just the same he would not fully reveal his secret.

"My grandfather Weyaaqaluk, on my mother's side, was known to have performed what I did tonight, and my mother and father had seen him," Unaliq answered. "Grandfather taught the chant to my mother and she in turn passed it on to me. Her father had complete confidence in her and my mother had complete confidence in me."

The Chief looked askance for a moment and then his eyes gazed down on the floor, a wan smile on his face.

The Tribute

"Just the same, ahngnaqon, you have given us a most unusual treat tonight and I'm very satisfied," Attungowruk said in a moderate voice. "The chant was the strangest one I have ever heard. It was penetrating and beautiful."

The powerful Chief paused a moment and then said in a loud, commanding voice:

"Women! Bring on more qorq and muktuk for the people!"