

Chief Attungowruk Was Loved, Then Hated at Tigara

Reprinted from Tundra Times
April 6, 1964

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The notorious and legendary Chief Attungowruk of Tigara (Point Hope) still haunts the ancient grounds of the village and its people. He was also known as a man of great generosity but generally, he was known as a man to be feared. Those people who had known him personally, although young at the time, were awed by him. When asked to tell of the Chief, they did so in low monotones as if the Chief might hear them.

Some people were definitely reluctant to recount the deeds of the famous, or infamous, Attungowruk. He had profoundly influenced the lives of the people who lived in his time. Chief Attungowruk was assassinated, or murdered, in the spring of 1884.

Idolized

In the earlier days of his chieftainship, Attungowruk was apparently idolized by his people.

"He was fond of children and old people," recalled the late Keshorna, this writer's mother and Attungowruk's niece. "He was especially fond of orphans. He clothed them and fed them. In the evenings, he was surrounded by old people. The reason for that was that he loved to listen to old stories and legends.

"He would have one of his wives continually cooking meat to feed the story tellers and other people who happened to be at the sessions. Attungowruk was a generous man. He was known for that most of all. He really cared for his people. He was, in turn, loved by many people. When Tahngok (Hard liquor) first came to our people, the good man in Attungowruk almost disappeared completely," Keshorna concluded sadly.

She never wanted to go any further than telling of the good side of the Chief. It was an apparent attempt on her part to remember the good deeds of her Uncle Attungowruk.

Man of Strength

Chief Attungowruk was a man of average height, but his wide shoulders and barrel chest and a strong face made him stand a-

part from the people around him. He was a powerful man physically and he looked it.

He was prone to be reticent but he possessed keen wit and humor that endeared him to many people in his earlier years. He was a man of great endurance that helped him to become a great hunter. His great generosity became apparent early in his life and his village accepted it gratefully.

These attributes were a basis for the village people to revere the Chief and their attitude toward him was one of trust and thankfulness for the sense of well-being he provided.

When many of these attributes waned with taking of the "drink" it was to make his people sad with regret. Strangely enough, his generosity of giving material things hardly suffered and he continued to give food and clothing to those who needed them—but, the spirit with which these things were given was missing and the people accepted them politely but without enthusiasm.

Fairness

Even after Chief Attungowruk took to drink, the sense of fairness and fairplay manifested itself on occasion. This had been instilled in him by his elders during his growing years and it never left him. One of these manifestations occurred one spring during whaling season in the following manner:

As usual, Chief Attungowruk and his whaling crew were out on the ice hunting bowhead whales. One whale came within good striking distance and the harpooner struck it. After the crew struggled with it for some time, the whale finally died. It was towed to the anchor-ice, and the cutting operation began.

After the cutting was well under way, one of the men cut out a harpoon head. It was given to the Chief for his inspection. Attungowruk turned it over in his hands looking for markings. "This harpoon head belongs to Akniachak and his crew," Attungowruk reflected.

The Chief then instructed a young man, "You better run over to Akniachak's camp and tell him he has caught a whale."

Unwritten Law

The unwritten law of whaling at Tigara has always been that the crew that first strikes a whale is the owner, even if that whale is killed by another crew. This tradition has been carried on to the present day.

Chief Attungowruk, that one spring day, gave the entire whale he and his crew had just killed, to Akniachak. The Chief and his men, again by tradition, received portions of the whale as reward for helping to kill the whale.

A strong sense of tradition prevailed in that event. The Chief, with his considerable power at that time, might have kept the whale for himself and his crew. The whale was of good size and had several hundred pounds of baleen, or whalebone, used at that time for corset stays for of the Western World. The price—approximately \$8 to \$9 per pound during that period. A high price.

Prestige

During the heyday of his chieftainship at Tigara, Attungowruk began to enjoy considerable prestige among the white whalers that came by the hundreds during late spring and summer in whaling ships in quest of the great baleen whale, the bowhead.

Also, during that time, The Revenue Cutter, "Bear," had begun to sail the Arctic waters each year keeping on the lookout for the safety of the whalers. The Bear made Tigara her regular stop each year. It was at this time that Chief Attungowruk got acquainted with a Captain Healy of the Bear.

"Attungowruk and Captain Healy became great friends," said the late Weyahok, this writer's father. "Being a consistent whale taker, Attungowruk had become quite wealthy from selling baleen. One summer, Captain Healy persuaded the Chief to buy lumber so he can build a big house for himself and his wives. Attungowruk consented and the Captain said he would bring it on the 'Cutter Bear' the following spring. Attungowruk never had the opportunity to use the lumber. He was killed during late spring before the 'Bear' arrived.

The Decline

With the influx of the ship whalers came the liquor. The Eskimos of the Arctic took to it

with great relish and a craving for more. Chief Attungowruk was far from being the exception. He bought quantities of it for his own use and he, subsequently, learned to brew intoxicating liquor from black molasses, as did many Eskimos along the Arctic coast.

With new supplies of liquor coming each spring and summer, and supplemented by liquor made from molasses, drinking by the Eskimos drastically increased. This, inevitably, brought on strained relations among families in the village. Brawls became frequent and dangerous. Murders began and to be committed.

Tigara began to get an uneasy atmosphere—a pall, sullen, and forboding.

"Rightly so, the people of the village began to sense that something evil was about to overtake them," recalled Weyahok.

This feeling was enhanced no little by Chief Attungowruk himself. He became a common drunkard. The usually somewhat reticent man became a roaring braggart when he drank. He was surly, insulting all at the same time. He also laughed and cried by turns. He became tender only to roar the next moment.

Many Wives

When Attungowruk was a young man of about 20 years, he married a girl he had known all his life. It was a marriage of love. Even after he married seven other women subsequently, his first wife was always his favorite and he showered her with affection and gifts no women before her had ever had.

He also treated his other wives with kindness. They lived in comfort and plenty along with cordiality. But all this was to change when the Chief began to go heavily for the drink. He became a tyrant in his household and his women suffered terribly.

Life of Dread

Life in the Attungowruk home became a life of dread for the women, including the favorite wife. Her husband began to accuse her with unfounded accusations. She denied them truthfully but Attungowruk, convinced by his imagined reasons, that of carrying on a tryst with a certain man, would not listen. Instead, the imagined idea persisted

and seethed in his fogged brain during his drinking bouts.

The favorite wife pleaded with her husband to realize that his accusations were baseless but he replied, "You were a fine woman but now you are resorting to lies. Every word out of your mouth is a lie. You are getting so adept at it now that you lie without remorse. You're a LIAR! LIAR! LIAR!"

He would then make threatening gestures to strike his wife and she cringed fearfully. She knew what harm he would do once he struck.

Apologetic

When the drinks wore off, Attungowruk was usually apologetic to his wife and he did it in a pathetic manner. He remembered some of the violent epithets he hurled at his wife.

"Dear one, I was cruel to you last night. Forgive me—forgive me... What is happening to me?" Attungowruk moaned.

"What is happening to us?" sobbed his wife, taking his head to her bosom. They wept silently.

It was at these moments that hope for better relations came to the wife and she said, "Dear husband, if you would leave tahngak alone we would be as happy as we once were. You are a strong man. Command yourself to leave it alone."

"I have tried, my dear wife, but the craving for it is so powerful it seems to draw me to it—help me to leave it alone!" Attungowruk pleaded.

The chief did make valiant efforts to abstain from the drink but these rarely lasted a week. He would become nervous and surly and to relieve this, he reverted back to liquor. This would go on for days. False accusations aimed at his favorite wife resumed and they became violent.

The Tragedy

One evening, Chief Attungowruk became especially violent—abusive, uncompromising to his favorite wife. He was staggering drunk. He roared and ranted—a drunken maniac!

"You are lying! Admit it, LIAR!" He screamed at his wife.

"Attungowruk, you are accusing me of falsehoods. I am a faithful wife to you. I have always been faithful," she countered pitifully.

"FALSEHOOD, FALSEHOOD! That's all I hear. I'm going to get the truth out of you! Truth out of you!"

With that, Chief Attungowruk lunged toward his wife who was sitting and cowering on the floor. He seized her by the neck and lifted her bodily in the air as if she weighed nothing. He shook her violently, shouting, "TELL ME, TELL ME THE TRUTH!"

As the Chief shook his wife, she went limp in his grasp. Even in his drunken stupor, he seemed to sense that something of great gravity had come upon him. He laid his wife gently down on the floor.

"What happened to you, dear wife? What happened—my dear wife?" the Chief asked in a hoarse whisper.

Chief Attungowruk had killed his favorite wife by strangulation and by breaking her neck! He reeled and fell heavily on the floor—senseless...

Tragic Realization

The Chief slept off the effects of liquor for hours. His other wives, who had watched in terror, did not dare to wake him, fearful of the reactions he might display. They were also fearful of touching the body of their dead companion. One of them

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had covered her with a siksikpuk (hoary marmot) blanket. The terror stricken women spent the night without sleep.

When Attungowruk finally awoke from his drunken sleep, the first thing he did was to ask for his favorite wife. When she did not answer, he asked the other women, "Where is she?" When they did not answer, he, apparently, sensed something was wrong and he shouted in anguish, "WHERE IS SHE?"

"She is right here," one woman said quietly, pointing to the dead woman, "You killed her last night."

The Chief paled, his face in a crooked grimace.

"Did I do what?" he asked incredulously.

"You killed her," was the quiet answer.

"You are wrong! I don't remember doing such a thing," Attungowruk said unbelievably.

He walked hesitantly toward his wife and knelt down. He lifted the cover and looked at her. He let out an agonized and heart-rendering sound. He buried his head on the bosom of his head wife and sobbed in deep masculine cries.

As the heart-broken Chief wept he asked over and over again:

"Why didn't you stop me — why didn't you stop me — why didn't you stop me?"

(To be continued)