

# DEAD TRUTH LIVE MYTH

## Background

The theory that paleolithic people, specifically Magdalenians, survived into modern times as Eskimos was first proposed by William Boyd Dawkins in 1866 and expanded by him in 1874 and 1880. He compared Magdalenian tools, as reported by Christy (1864) and Lartet (1866), with Eskimo tools, as reported by Ross (1819, 1835), Parry (1821, 1824), and Lyon (1824, 1825). He also noted both were indifferent to corpses and crushed bones for marrow. Magdalenian hunters, he proposed, followed deer and musk ox north with the retreating glaciers.

In 1889, L. Testut described a paleolithic skull discovered in Chancelade, France, as more Eskimoid than Cro-Magnon. The view soon became accepted that Eskimos descended, in blood and culture, directly from the Magdalenians. Eskimos were seen as “arrested” at an early evolutionary stage. As recently as 1924, W. J. Sollas expanded this theory in a popular book, appropriately titled *Ancient Hunters and Their Modern Representatives*.

Franz Boas and Aleš Hrdlicka disagreed. They doubted Testut’s conclusions and realized his theory furthered racism. They sought further evidence. Much Eskimos already existed for Eskimos generally, but Polar Eskimos were regarded as special – as living fossils. When first contacted, in 1818, they lived in isolation, without memory of other people, and without the bow, kayak, and other features common to Eskimo culture.

We now believe their ancestors migrated from the Mackenzie River area to northern Greenland in comparatively recent times. During that migration, all elders may have died and with them, technical information.

This is hindsight. In the 1890s, Polar Eskimos remained a mystery. Robert Peary was then in contact with them. Boas asked him to invite one to New York, as an informant, Peary bought six, for exhibition.

Eskimos had been exhibited in Europe as early as the seventeenth century. London displayed a group in the 1820s; New York in 1863; Chicago in 1893. At least three groups toured Europe in the 1870s.

One of these, from Labrador, lost all of its members while on tour. Mortality was also high for Westerners in the Arctic. For every Eskimo buried in Europe or the Lower States before 1900, many more explorers and whalers filled arctic graves. Yet, Westerners volunteered to go North and Eskimos volunteered to go South.

In New York, "Peary's" Eskimos served as ethnographic and linguistic informants (Kroeber, 1899, 1900). Their bodies were measured and cast. When four died, their skeletons were measured. An autopsy was performed on one (Hrdlicka 1910).

These findings cast doubt on Dawkin's theory and helped Boas challenge racism. Yet from the beginning, journalists treated the whole affair as entertainment, show biz – their biz. They featured events that never happened, omitted events that did, and ridiculed scientists. A century later, nothing has changed.

### **1897-1997**

Peary arrived back in New York with a 90-100 ton meteorite and six Polar Eskimos. Of these, four soon died of flu. The other two went back to Greenland, but then one, Minik, the youngest, elected to return to America where he died in 1918.

Minik's story is accurately told in Rolf Gilberg's *Mennesket Minik (1888-1918)* and less accurately in Kenn Harper's *Give Me My Father's Body*.

Harper appears to have written for film. To this end, he accepted a tabloid account of Minik discovering his father's skeleton on display in the American Museum of Natural History. This never happened. It provides Harper, however, with the book's title and the key scene for a potential film.

In 1992, I heard that the film rights had been optioned. I urged the Museum to ship the bones back. They were eager to do so, but first needed a formal request from relatives or officials. Correspondence failed to produce such a request.

So Jørgen Meldgaard of the Danish National Museum and I met with town officials at Qaanaaq, the village now occupied by descendents of the six Eskimos. All strongly favored continued research in the area, but none expressed interest in the bones. Finally, nine months later, at the urging of a bishop in Denmark, the Lutheran Church of Qaanaaq requested their return.

To save time and money, I asked the U.S. Air Force to transport the bones via nearby McGuire Air Base. McGuire maintains biweekly flights to Thule. The tiny coffins, built by the Museum, along with four busts, cast from life-models, occupied twelve cubic feet, hardly a challenge to a Hercules cargo plane, most of which flew virtually empty.

This simple request produced a comedy of calls shunted from base to base across the country. The key figure at McGuire never answered or "was on the phone" or "just stepped out." Finally, I call the Commanding Officer. He picked up the phone. "Major...", I said, " " doesn't answer her phone." A moment later her furious voice ended any thought of help. So I called an Assistant Secretary of the Air Force, Washington.

"Who," he asked, "was Peary?"

“Admiral, U.S. Navy. Famous.”

“Navy’s problem. Not my bones, old man,” and hung up.

The Royal Danish Air Force resolved the matter within hours. Meldgaard and I received the bones in Thule and took them to Qaanaaq. On 1 August 1993, the remains of Qisuk, Nuktaq, Atangana, and Aviaq were buried in Qaanaaq’s Lutheran cemetery.

I extend cordial greetings to the citizens of Qaanaaq from the trustees and administration of the American Museum of Natural History in New York.

Museums of natural history were founded on the belief that all life belongs to a common order subject to common principles. There is the further belief that science can contribute to human betterment. To this end, scientists gather information from many lands.

It was in this spirit that citizens from this area visited New York nearly a century ago. There they contributed details of their customs and beliefs to this grand pursuit of knowledge. They did not live to know the importance of their contribution, but we do and it should not be forgotten. We gather here today to honor them.

Edmund Carpenter  
August 1, 1993  
Qaanaaq, Greenland

Qaanaaq looks south across Inglefield Fjord toward the ice cap beyond. August 1<sup>st</sup> was an indescribably beautiful day, the loveliest I’ve ever known in the North. Icebergs moved imperceptibly out to sea. Kayakers, within sight, hunted narwhal. A boy practiced kayaking near shore. Young people gathered on the beach. Families loaded open boats and set out for summer camps.



**Figure 1: Funeral procession from church to cemetery. Photograph: Adelaide de Menil.**

Yet about a hundred people assembled for the service. From a chapel-like annex adjoining the church, pallbearers carried the tiny coffins into the bright, modern church. One side of the church, all glass, faced the mountain. The other side, also glass, looked out over the fjord. Candles lined the aisle. The pastor wore the traditional Lutheran cassock with wide, starched fraise.

At the close of the service, pallbearers carried the coffins outside and placed them in an open truck. The congregation followed the truck about half a mile to a cemetery of white crosses and brightly colored artificial flowers. Three people spoke: Pastor Hans Johan Lennert, Mayor August Eipe, and I. The collective grave was then filled, a cross erected, flowers placed beneath it, and a bronze plaque, which begins, "They Have Returned" added. At which point, everyone—literally everyone—shook hands. We then returned to the village where we sat about in groups, discussing what we had just witnessed.

"How," my wife asked Minik's last surviving relative, "do you feel about the return of the bones?"

After a long pause, he said, "If that's what they [the Museum people] wanted, it's alright. And if they [the bones] had stayed where they were [New York], that would have been alright too."

"May I record you saying that?"

"No. I'll soon be dead [he was then 94] and I don't want my voice left behind. And no photographs. I want nothing left."

This attitude derives from the traditional Eskimo belief in reincarnation. All life is seen as eternal, played out in this world and no other. The dead, they say, are always with us, reincarnated in new bodies. Strict taboos ensure rebirth. Bones are irrelevant. Just before Atangana died she asked that "the stones should not be put too close together, for fear that she might not breathe. She did not want to be buried in the sand, and wanted no coffin." Nuktaq requested that Atangana be buried as she would have been at home.



**Figure 2: Burial service. Pastor Hans Johan Lennert and Mayor August Eipe. Photograph: Adelaide de Menil.**

### **Reincarnation vs. Resurrection**

In 1822, the explorer William Parry was shocked to find dogs eating newly buried bodies and shocked even more by the Eskimos' response to his protests. Another explorer reported seeing a child playing with a skull, and I often saw, as did all visitors to the North until recently, human bones and skulls scattered about, just outside camps.

Christian belief holds that body and soul reunite in Heaven or Hell. Corpses are preserved to assist resurrection. To prevent resurrection, heretics were once burned or quartered and their parts scattered.

Polar Eskimos believed that the evil of a dead person remained in its corpse, its bones. Personal effects were buried with the body or discarded.

Qisuk, Nuktaq, Atangana, and Aviaq were never Christians, but those who welcomed them back were. I felt the service entirely appropriate. It made sense to the living, for it reunited them with the dead.

If I were asked, what, in my opinion, sets Eskimos apart from other people I know, I would say sensitivity in human relations and the gift to defuse unnecessary problems. Those virtues were fully displayed on this occasion. The whole ceremony was really for us. When I asked Navarana Harper (former wife of Kenn Harper) about the reaction of the community, she answered, "Embarrassment." I'm sure she was right. Embarrassment over our discomfort. Their desire to help us.

Before the funeral, Emil Rosing, Director Greenland National Museum & Archives; Jørgen Meldgaard; and my wife and I met in the Town Hall with Mayor Eipe, three Councilmen, Pastor Lennert, and Lise Osterby, Town Manager. Life-busts of Qisuk, Nuktaq, Atangana, and Minik were presented to the town and placed by the Mayor on prominent display. They looked magnificent.

I suggested we add a bust of Uisaakassak, called "The Great Liar" when his tales about New York were ridiculed. My only reservation was that Uisaakassak resembled Mayor Eipe and people might think the Mayor was exhibiting a bust of himself. That obstacle, the Mayor said, could be overcome. Food was served and each visitor was given an ivory carving executed in traditional style.

A year earlier we had met with our hosts to discuss the funeral. Kenn Harper's *Give Me My Father's Body* was not their favorite reading. They knew enough of the true story to reject the prejudices he sought to arouse. And they shared our hope that the people of Qaanaaq would again become collaborators with scientists.

Their diplomacy in handling the affair was masterful. Until the day before the funeral, many people in the village knew nothing of these plans. Outside inquiries were ignored. Three foreign TV crews, meeting silence and delay, ran out of time and money. Only Greenland's TV crew stayed. The funeral remained a village affair, warm, dignified, not one unfriendly word or glance. For days afterwards, we were invited into home after home.

Just before the funeral, we screened slides of 147 paintings by Albert Operti, Peary's official artist. About thirty people came. Later, word spread and a second screening was requested. This time the community hall was filled with elders. No one in the first row was under eighty. Peary's son, as well as his great-grandson, Robert E. Peary II, were there, along with two of Matthew Henson's grandsons. Someone suggested there might also be descendents of Operti, said to

be 4'2" and remembered as a great womanizer. Navarana Harper called out to the shortest adult present: "Alberto!" and he hobbled forward on his knees.

The screening resembled a songfest. Every locale was instantly identified. A painting of a walrus in clear water near a cliff brought protests: "A seal, perhaps; a walrus, never." Two paintings of fresh graves, each with a sled, one with five dogs, the other with one dog, led to discussions about dog sacrifice, including unwanted dogs substituted for good ones. Dog sacrifice among Polar Eskimos, as far as I know, has never been recorded.

I was in Paris several weeks later when the *New York Times* ran an article on the funeral, page 1. It was soon reprinted throughout Europe. For about a week, in kiosk after kiosk, portraits of Peary or Minik stared back at me – different papers, different languages, different fonts, but always the same story.

That story never happened. Its key scene – Minik discovering his father's skeleton on display – occurred only in the press. Behind this fiction were real people, real events, but by adding here, deleting there, journalists fashioned a mythic drama that would not die. Nor was it amenable to correction.

From the day he arrived in New York, Minik became a media pet. Then he became their unwitting but enthusiastic tool. His attacks on Peary and the Museum sold papers, but served him ill. Back in Greenland, if he'd won the new wife he sought, he might have stayed. Later in New York, he seems to have lost touch with any reality. His story is certainly moving, but complicated, contradictory, being real life.

The one good thing that came out of this sad tale went unmentioned in any press account I read. Boas and Hrdlicka rejected the theory, beloved by racists, that various tribal peoples were arrested at different evolutionary stages.

Knowledge gained from these six Polar Eskimos challenged that belief. None lived to know the importance of their contribution, but we do and it should not be forgotten.

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