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Mnemonic ‘Boundary Objects’ and Postcolonial Restitution

The Story of Three Greenlandic Tupilait

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Abstract: Drawing on new materialist and object-centered historical criticism, this article analyses colonial and post-colonial discourses of the Greenlandic figurines of the mythical being of ill-wishing and revenge, tupilak (plural form: tupilait). It focuses on three tupilak figures, made in 1905/1906 by a shaman Mitsivarnianga on a request of a Danish ethnographer William Thalbitzer, which today are part of the Danish National Museum collections. In the early 20th century, Greenlandic tupilait (and Inuit cultural production in general) were an object of fascination among European collectors, artists, and the general public. Asking what these objects had come to mean in (and for) Europe, this article points to marginalized Greenlandic narratives of Mitsivarnianga’s tupilat, and builds a critical narrative of these objects as material effects of the disruptions of indigenous community and sustenance by Western colonialism. Drawing on critical insights from the current post-colonial restitution debates, it problematizes the differential political-economic conditions and relations of power, under which the colonial acquisitions and procurements took place. The article argues that cultural heritage items, such as the three tupilat, are mnemonic ‘boundary objects’ that can potentially forge links between disparate memories of colonialism in Denmark and Greenland.

Keywords: post-colonial Greenland, tupilak, William Thalbitzer, memory objects, heritage restitution

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Introduction

In the years 1905–1906 the Danish ethnographer and philologist William Thalbitzer (1873–1958) was based in the settlement of Ammassalik (today Tasiilaq), researching East Greenlandic culture and language (Holtved 1958; Thalbitzer 1931). As part of his interactions with the Greenlandic community, he made an acquaintance with a local *angakkuk* (shaman), Mitsivarnianna. On Thalbitzer's request, Mitsivarnianna created three figures of a mythical creature of Greenlandic beliefs, tupilak (plural form tupilait). The figures made by Mitsivarnianna are some of the oldest existing tupilait from East Greenland. They also have a unique place in the history of the European reception of tupilait in that they mark the moment in the Western records when tupilait became associated with material artifacts, rather than only characters in narratives, beliefs and myths.

Mitsivarnianna's tupilait are currently part of the Danish National Museum collections, where they were transferred from their previous location at the Danish Maritime Museum. Because they were not in the Danish National Museum collections during the process of the museum's return of heritage artefacts to Greenland (1983–2001), the three tupilait never became objects of post-colonial restitutive claims. In this article, I outline the history of these objects drawing on theoretical and conceptual perspectives from materialist and object-centred historical criticism. I then consider them in relation to some of the key questions raised by post-colonial debates of cultural heritage restitution.

I show that while the acquisition of these objects and their incorporation in Denmark's 'Greenlandic collections' coincided with and bolstered their specific ethnographic narrative, there is another story of these tupilait, far less known in Europe, which has been preserved through oral transmission by Mitsivarnianna's family. At hand are not simply 'plural narratives', but that the differential colonial conditions of their production reinforced the Western narratives' domination of history and interpretation of these objects. By fitting the objects at hand into the cultural framework of 'folk art' and 'primitivism', and taking

as its epistemological reference-point the binary opposition between ‘things’ and ‘persons’, the narrative has produced a reductive and inadequate interpretation of the Greenlandic tupilait. In contrast, this article views the tupilak figures as material and discursive effects of the disruptions of indigenous community and sustenance brought about by Western colonialism.

The backdrop of that discussion are the theoretical and critical perspectives from the current debates about restitution and return of post-colonial cultural heritage, which are currently based in Western institutions (museums, archives, libraries, etc.). These perspectives problematize the differential political-economic conditions under which colonial acquisitions were made, even when the procurement of these objects was not an act of confiscation or looting. In regard to the translocation of these items to Europe and their inclusion into imperial museal collections, I draw on those post-colonial scholars and thinkers who argue that the great interest in these items in early 20th century among Euro-American artistic, collectors and the general publics, and their discursive envelopment in so-called ‘folk art’ and ‘primitivism’ aesthetic theory, were due to Europe’s own moment of crisis of meaning, of identity, and of modern narratives of progress. By being viewed as material manifestation of authenticity and artistic inspiration, these objects were construed as offering the possibilities of historical experience, which Europe believed to have lost. At the same time, there arose cultural and political anxieties about the future of this production, and about the future of their indigenous creators, in the wake of their contact with Western civilisation, which led to arguments for protectionism and conservationism.

While I note that the three tupilait have not been subject to repatriation claims, I do not take a position on whether they should (or should not) be returned to Greenland. Partly, this is due to considerations of my own positionality vis-a-vis these debates and fields of knowledge: as a non-Greenlandic researcher, I do not think it is up to me to decide whether (or how) such restitutive claims are made. I also agree with those postcolonial scholars who, while supportive of the heritage return demands, note that repatriation debates tend to treat the point of return as a sole end of these processes. Instead, they raise a range of related points, including a question about the role that these material items made by ‘Europe’s others’ have played, and continue to play, in European museums, and about their mnemonic and reparative potential: can these items act as mnemonic objects that ‘prop’ plural and relational (here: Greenlandic-Danish) cultural memory, and facilitate anti-colonial relations?

What are tupilait?

According to Inuit Greenlandic beliefs, a tupilak (ᑕᐱᑕᑦᑲ) is a creaturely being of ill-wishing and revenge. They were crafted for the purpose of bring misfortune on enemies and communal antagonists by assembling fragments of wood, seaweed, animal bone, pelt, and human body parts. They were animated in secret ceremonies, and subsequently placed in proximity to sea (or in the sea). The practice was subject to strict prohibitions and taboo in the communities (Haagen 2014, 7-9; Buijs 2018, 164-165).

By the time Thalbitzer set off for Greenland, Danish colonial administrators, explorers and missionaries, had made records of the tupilak beliefs and practices. This included annotations made by Paul Egede in his journals on stories surrounding the crafting of tupilait (1788, 143, 192 n.223). As knowledge about these beliefs spread outside of Greenland, tupilak-making became an object of great interest, and even fascination, for colonial ethnography. At the same time, it also received negative comments from the missionaries and others who associated tupilak-making with witchcraft (Neuhaus 2000, 247). In the mid 19th and early 20th centuries, tupilait narratives became a popular literary subject among Europeans aiming to record and preserve Inuit oral traditions, including the texts by Hinrich Rink (1875), Gustav Holm (1888; 1914), and Knud Rasmussen (1921). A recurrent motif in these narratives, and a way by which the European colonial scholarship made sense of the tupilait role in Greenlandic societies and cultures, was that of “reverse amulet” (Thalbitzer 1914, 643). Rather than guaranteeing protection and fortuity, and warding off evil, tupilait brought about adversity, misfortune, harm, and even caused death.

From 1920s onwards, the production of tupilait developed at the interstices of decorative art, folk art, and arctic tourism (Haagen 2014). Sheila Romalis (1985) has provided a critical perspective on these processes, drawing on theories of acculturation, and argued that by classifying tupilait according to Western epistemic categories, the practice of tupilak-making undermined their indigenous social and spiritual meanings. Tupilak-making was reduced to a “non-powerful secular visual image” and “transformed and transferred onto carved representation,” while “fail[ing] to incorporate the indigenous ideas behind [their] subject and form” (Romalis 1985, 52).

The Postcolonial Return of Collections to Greenland: The Utimut Process

My analysis of the three tupilait as mnemonic ‘boundary objects’ proceeds against the backdrop of the on-going debates about the post-colonial return and repatriation of cultural heritage, material objects and traditional knowledge from Euro-American institutions of former colonial empires (including museum and archives) to the original creators and custodians of these objects and knowledge. It is noteworthy that Danish present-day legacies of colonialism in the Arctic (and beyond) have been marginal to these debates (cf. Eilertsen 2012; Buijs 2016). Instead, the dominant approach displayed by the main Danish curatorial, educational and archival-ethnographic institutions has been to regard the process of heritage return (at least in its relations with Greenland) as accomplished and free from the high degree of politicisation characterising the current debates (cf. Thorleifsen 2009).

The main platform for cultural heritage return from Denmark to Greenland was a process called ‘Utimut’ (a word that means ‘return’ in Greenlandic), and which was introduced in the wake of the establishment of Greenland’s Home Rule governance in 1979 (Schultz-Lorentzen 1988; Berglund 1994; Grønnow, and Jensen 2008; Bandle, Chechi, and Renold 2012). The Utimut process operated for nearly twenty years (from 1983 until 2001) and involved division of collections held by the Danish National Museum and the transfer to the newly established Greenland National Museum and Archives. Overall, about 35.000 art, heritage and ethnographic items were returned and the process concluded that Greenland’s collections were in result “complete and entirely representative” (“Successful Repatriation”). More than 100.000 Greenlandic items have remained in Denmark’s collections.

Internationally, the Utimut process has been considered a highly successful case of post-colonial heritage transfer, and upon its completion UNESCO advocated it as a ‘model’ that could be adapted to other post-colonial contexts (Thorleifsen 2009; “Successful Repatriation”). It was a cooperative, bilateral, top-down and largely technical process, which included both Danish and Greenlandic representatives, and which, in addition to its main goal of dividing and returning Danish collection, also set up the framework for future research and educational collaboration between the institutions. Characterised by a relatively narrow mandate and an explicitly non-political framing – it deliberately excluded formal political actors from participation, relegating the decisional powers on the division and transfer of collections to those holding relevant expertise in Greenlandic art, heritage and art history and ethnography. It is important to note that

the exclusion of political actors meant that representatives of local Greenlandic authorities or heritage associations, Inuit leaders and holders of traditional knowledge, and descendants of the objects' creators (basically anyone who did not fit into the formal rubric of an 'expert') did not take part in the scheme. Also, because the Utimut scheme concerned only collections held at the Danish National Museum, it did not offer Greenland the possibility to demand return of items held in other public institutions, or in private collections, in Denmark.

The Utimut process never became entangled in the broader social justice debates or a target of anti-colonial movement, which accompany many of the European debates about post-colonial cultural heritage returns today (see e.g. Robertson 2019; Scott 2019). It is striking that Utimut was entirely void of reparative goals; it did not imbricate with post-colonial claims for rectification and redress of Denmark's enrichment through colonisation of the Arctic and the dispossession of the Greenlandic people of their heritage. With the overarching objective of a 'division of the national Danish museum's holdings, the focus was on facilitating formation of two independent and congruent ethnographic and archaeological collections. In 1985 the Utimut committee adopted principles for the selection and transfer of objects, including the "respect for Greenlandic wishes to acquire object of special importance for the Greenlandic identity," that was counterbalanced by another principle – that Danish museal and historical interests would also be respected ("Principper" 1985). This raises questions about the extent to which Utimut was congruent with the goals of post-colonial Greenlandic governance and whether it is not more accurate to approach it through the prism of Denmark's broader political and socio-cultural agenda, ambitions and orientations in the Arctic (*Grønlandspolitik*), as well as the debates about Danish postcolonial identity formation (cf. Jensen 2018; Jensen 2019; Rahbek-Clemmensen 2011). Høgni Hoydal's notion of "neo-colonialism with a human face" (2006, n. pag.) and Lill-Ann Körber's concept of 'humane colonialism' (2014) are both useful descriptors of 'soft power' practices, including collaboration, protectionism, administrative and welfare resources (etc.), that have enabled the Danish state it to maintain and consolidate its Arctic presence in the face of greater autonomy demands by Greenland (Rahbek-Clemmensen 2011, 9-12).

Mitsivarnianga's Three Tupilait – A Story of Love and Revenge

In the attempt of bringing together the political, cultural and material contexts of, on the one hand, the consideration of Mitsivarnianga's three tupilait as mnemonic 'boundary objects' and, on the other hand, the questions of cultural repatriation to Greenland, I take as my reference point the idea of 'unrestitutable objects'. It not only references the historical fact that these three items were never included in the Utimut discussions,¹ but also points to the discursive process whereby the legal and political status of certain things 'solidifies' as *outside* or *beyond* restitutive possibilities.

In this section I outline the history of the three tupilait created by shaman Mitsivarnianga in 1905/1906 drawing on their two separate narratives: first, the dominant colonial narrative that takes as its key source Thalbitzer's diaries and academic articles about the items, and, second, a marginalised local Greenlandic narrative, which has been sustained largely through oral history accounts preserved with Mitsivarnianga's family. Juxtaposing these two narratives not only pluralizes the history of these objects, but also, as disrupts, troubles and *provincializes* (cf. Chakraborty 2000) the dominant and hegemonic cultural memory of Arctic colonialism more broadly.

William Thalbitzer met Mitsivarnianga in 1905 and referred to him as the first Ammassalik *angakkuk* who was christened (Thalbitzer 1933-1934, 60).² Mitsivarnianga's stories became a source of invaluable ethnographic and philological knowledge for Thalbitzer, which he recorded in the extensive publication "Østgrønlandske stemmer" (1933-1934). Thalbitzer recurrently emphasised the fact that Mitsivarnianga's newly adopted Christianity had coincided closely with a traditional Inuit belief system, which included Mitsivarnianga's interactions with his spiritual companions endowed with both beneficial and detrimental powers (Thalbitzer 1933-1934, 60). Oreskov (2006, 218) reports that Mitsivarnianga was a talented craftsman, famous for his kayak building skills.

¹ Mitsivarnianga's tupilait were given by Thalbitzer to the Museum of Trade and Shipping in Elsinore (currently the Maritime Museum of Denmark), rather than the Danish National Museum. For that reason, the figures were *not* included in the repatriation negotiations, which concerned solely a bilateral collaboration between two national institutions. They subsequently entered the Danish National Museum's collections in 2017 (this was established through my email communication with Thorbjørn Thaarup, the curator at the Maritime Museum of Denmark on March 10, 2020).

² The historical accuracy of that claim has been questioned by Oreskov (2006).



Fig. 1: Tupilak in the form of a dog, made by Mitsivarnianga in Ammassalik, 1905-1906. Photograph by Roberto Fortuna, CC-BY-SA, with permissions from The National Museum of Denmark.

Thalbitzer's diaries, letters and ethnographic studies of the Inuit in the Ammassalik area all mention that Mitsivarnianga had assembled and carved three tupilait for Thalbitzer on the latter's explicit request. Thalbitzer wanted to see depictions or copies of tupilait, which Mitsivarnianga and others in the community had either made previously or witnessed being made (cf. Thalbitzer 1914; Thalbitzer 1953; Thalbitzer 2014 [1905-1906]). This was a point of misunderstanding between Thalbitzer and Mitsivarnianga, which casts into relief the limits of the Western epistemic framework that the colonial-era explorers and anthropologists brought to bear on the people and cultures they encountered. Thalbitzer clearly thought that he was receiving a replica of a 'real' tupilak, but Mitsivarnianga's family history emphasises that while Mitsivarnianga set off to "show Thalbitzer how a tupilak looked like," he also created objects endowed with agential powers (Oreskov 2006, 219). The assumed universality of the binary distinction between the authentic object and its 'copy' did not hold (for a critical discussion see Arke 2012 [1995]).

The first tupilak is a dog-like object with a human face. It was made of wood and cloaked with a skin. The tupilak's back is pierced with a harpoon and it has two wooden flotation bladders attached to it (Fig. 1).

According to Thalbitzer, this was a carved replica of a tupilak originally assembled years earlier by a man called Pikinak, whom Mitsivarnianga asserted to have seen "rowing along the foot of the Angeen mountain in Sermilik," and



Fig. 2: Tupilak in the form of a doll/child, made by Mitsivarnianga in Ammassalik, 1905-1906. Photograph by Roberto Fortuna, CC-BY-SA, with permissions from The National Museum of Denmark.

whom he described as “a body of a dog with the legs of a fox and a human head [...] creeping on shore dragging behind it two inflated sealing bladders, which were made fast on its back by means of long lines [...]” (1914, 644). This is a common motif in the Greenlandic tupilak narratives, which Kaalund discusses in *The Art of Greenland* (1983, 68), namely that they were swimming in the sea and could be mistaken by hunters for seals. In consequence, “[e]ither the monster pull[ed] the hunter with it down into the deep, or the hunter succeed[ed] in killing the tupilak” (Kaalund 1983, 68).

The other two tupilait are closely linked to Mitsivarnianga’s family history. The tupilak that has attracted most attention is a wooden child-like figure, about 30 cm long, which was wound with in strips of untreated leather and equipped with a dead child’s eyes stuck into the carved sockets and two teeth (Fig. 2).

While Thalbitzer reports only that this tupilak was once seen by Mitsivarnianga in his dreams (1914, 644), Claus Oreskov (2006) in his study of the Greenlandic family history of these objects gives a more detailed account of this tupilak that closely fits in the rubric of a memory object³ (Oreskov’s piece was written on the occasion of a visit at Kronborg Castle by Mitsivarnianga’s des-

³ On the concept of ‘memory objects’ in Greenlandic context, see Viljoen and Zolkos 2022.



Fig. 3: Tupilak in the form of a bird, made by Mitsivarnianga in Ammassalik, 1905-1906. Photograph by Roberto Fortuna, CC-BY-SA, with permissions from The National Museum of Denmark.

cendants, see also Haagen 2012, 203-209). What Thalbitzer's sources ignore is that this tupilak had been in fact formerly assembled by the mother of Mitsivarnianga. The purpose was for the creaturely being to attack Mitsivarnianga, his wife Pisêrajik, and son Kârale, due to a conflict that had erupted in the family following Mitsivarnianga's marriage (Oreskov 2006, 220). The story of the tupilak and its night attack during Kârale's childhood was reportedly passed by Kârale to his daughter, Elisa Maqe, and then to her Danish teacher, Ove Bak, in 1960s. Bak published the story in a 1979 book, *Troldebjørnen*.

The third tupilak is a wooden bird-like carving (Fig. 3). The 'original' had been assembled and animated by Mitsivarnianga himself in the years prior to Thalbitzer's visit. Mitsivarnianga used dead bird's and infant's body parts for making it.

Thalbitzer reports (1914, 644) in his ethnographic description of this item that Mitsivarnianga "assured [Thalbitzer] in good faith, that he had seen later [the tupilak] moving or creeping across the water in the neighbourhood of Qernertuartiwin in the Ammassalik Fjord". This tupilak's assemblage was also closely linked to the aforementioned family conflict and revenge: this bird-like tupilak was created by Mitsivarnianga as a protective measure against his mother and her tupilak (Oreskov 2006, 220; Haagen 2012, 207-208). Mitsivarnianga and Pisêrajik's son, Karâle Andreassen (a well-known Greenlandic artist active in

the first decades of the twentieth century) preserved some of the emotive and aesthetic motives of his father's tupilait, as well as thematized selected aspects of their accompanying family history, in a series of sketches and drawings of tupilait (Geertsen 1990; Buijs 2018). Some of Andreassen's sketches were produced for Thalbitzer and included in his ethnographic collections and publications.

Post-colonial Cultural Memory and Restitution

The broader cultural and political context of European meaning-making and interpretations of these indigenous objects, and their inclusion in the Western museums' collections, is that of a distinct 20th century historical moment described by Achille Mbembe as a crisis of modernity to which these objects offer a response (2019a; 2019b). While Mbembe's interventions address African heritage in Western museums, they are, I suggest, highly relevant also for considering other indigenous peoples' art in the European collections, including Greenlandic tupilait. The question that I seek to respond to in this section is how to think today about these material items, such as Mitsivarnianga's tupilait, from the perspective of their capacity to generate and transmit cultural colonial memory, while paying attention to the social and cultural effects of these objects' movements *across borders* – state borders, but also other kinds of borders: communal, institutional, ideational, and epistemic?

In a talk given at the University of Cologne on the subject of post-colonial heritage restitution, Mbembe (2019a) raises a series of questions that extend beyond, and radicalise, demands for these objects' return to the communities of their makers and custodians: "what precisely Europe wants to divest itself of [with the return of these objects], and why?", "what traces of these objects will remain in Europe once they have been repatriated?", "what modes of existence does absence make possible?", and, finally, "after the objects were in European museums for so long, has Europe learnt how to come to terms with those from outside it, since part of the work of these objects was to connect us to those far away?" Drawing on his philosophical and historical writings on the conditions of post-colony and necropolitics (see Mbembe 2001; 2005; 2019c), Mbembe radicalises the approaches to cultural heritage restitution in Europe today, by pointing out what he calls "colonial amnesia" concerning the history of these objects' acquisition. During the colonial times, collection and destruction were two sides of the same coin: they proceeded alongside each other, and mutually reinforced one another (Mbembe 2018). Their acquisition, even not an act of outright confiscation or looting, often took place under highly asymmetrical and differential

conditions of power. What this means for the objects in focus of this article (which were made on Thalbitzer's request and were received by him as a gift) is that there nevertheless is a need to view critically the discursive and historical conditions that have framed their procurement and migration. Mbembe points out that colonial dispossession and appropriation never were merely about material translocation of objects due to their cultural and economic value, but went hand-in-hand with symbolic and structural violence and ruination of societies whose lives centred around these objects. The loss of these objects undermined practices that sustained these communities and their belief systems – their acquisition and translocation across borders meant their severance from traditional meanings as these objects were re-labeled (and frequently mislabelled, see e.g. Ngumi and Chuchu 2021; Ngumi 2022) in accordance with Western epistemologies which underpinned the modern museum institutions. For that reason, it is not enough to equate restitution with physical relocation of these objects to their communities of origin and providence; rather, Mbembe argues (2019a) that heritage return struggles should be “re-centered around the historical, political and anthropological stakes of restitution” in order to open up possibilities for justice and for repair of relations.

Incorporating the objects of indigenous cultural heritage within the institutional and discursive spaces of the museum as ‘artefacts’ and ‘exhibits’ forced these objects into the Western categories of knowledge based on an oppositional relation of persons and things (Esposito 2015, 1). Western epistemology of material objects is based on the assumption, Esposito argues, that there is an unbridgeable “caesura” between persons and things, whereby the subject acquires the status of personhood *insofar as they are not a thing*, and things are, by definition, envisioned as void of agential or affective powers. The dominant modern humanist perspective repudiated traditional ontologies of the human subject. Rather than hierarchical individualism, these ontologies proposed the idea of the human as relational and as situated within their natural and social environments. Esposito's critique of Western humanism is based on the view that opposing humans and things is not an enlightened departure from animism, but a sign of limitations of our language and imagination. It is, he argues, a sign of our lost capacity to envision and recognise the overlaps between, and the complementarity of, material objects and human subjects.

The Greenlandic figure of tupilak, which is based materially and symbolically on hybrid life-forms, exemplifies the epistemological complementarity of things and persons. Assembled and animated by individual members of the community, tupilait were believed to be carrying a part of their creator within themselves, and were placed in a substitutive relation to them; they *stood in the place* of their creator. When incorporated in the Western museums, the objects

were assigned the status of the inanimate ethnographic ‘artefacts’, while the traditional systems of knowledge and “pre-colonial systems of thought” attributed to them agential and affective qualities and viewed them as a “depository of vital force, of different energies, destructive [or] nurturing the reserves of life, [and of] potentiality” (Mbembe 2019b). In this context, Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy (2018, 34) write of non-Western art objects in European museums being deprived of their communal significance as “mediators of correspondence, of metaphors and passages within an ecosystem characterized by fluidity and circularity.” These critical interventions point out the Western “obsession with policing the border[s] between humans and objects” (Mbembe 2019b), and, in direct relevance to my discussion of Mitsivarnianga’s tupilait, recognise the importance of traditional knowledge and the objects-centred practices of sociality, including the making, use and repair of objects. Tupilait were not harmless, inconsequential and ‘passive’ objects; their use and making always involved risks and danger.

While the current debates on post-colonial heritage return, to which Mbembe, Sarr and Savoy (and numerous others) have contributed often concern the contexts of the global South, they align with critical perspectives on critiques of the colonial appropriation objects coming from Greenland, and the problematic of their incorporation in European state museums and private collections. Even though the objects in European collections came from different places and were made by different people, they were subject to homogenizing discourses and procedures, which fitted them into the aesthetic-theoretical frame of native art, primitivism and exoticism. The tupilak figurines in European museums have been no exception in this regard, as Romalis has shown (1983; 1985). Showing the detrimental effects of colonial acculturation on Greenlandic material and spiritual cultures, Romalis argues that subsequently tupilak figure became reduced to “secular and bounded images,” fitted into the Western categories of “Eskimo art,” and defined in representational terms (1985, 52).

In her artistic and academic work, the Greenlandic-Danish artist Pia Arke (1958-2007) critiqued the imposition of European interpretations onto Greenlandic art, and one of the objects in her discussions (and her artistic productions) was the tupilak. In her well-known essay *Ethno-Aesthetics* (2012 [1995]), Arke critiqued Bodil Kaalund’s monumental 1983 study of Inuit art, *The Art of Greenland* (which also included images and discussion of Mitsivarnianga’s tupilait). Arke’s conception of ‘ethno-aesthetic critique’ aligned with postcolonial cultural and aesthetic criticism, and centred specifically on the label of ‘ethnic art’, which was uniformly applied in Western museums to non-European and indigenous minority cultural productions. The homogenising rubric of ‘ethnic art’, Arke argued, reduced this highly diverse and rich cultural field to merely

a ‘supplement’ of European art (2012 [1995], 336). For Arke, Kaalund’s work pivoted on the ambition to articulate a conception of the Greenlandic aesthetics as manifestations of ‘naturalness’ and ‘authenticity’. Kaalund’s depictions of Inuit art were based on the assumption, which originated in early colonial ethnography, that traditional Greenlandic societies did not distinguish between ‘art’ and ‘artefact’, and hence, while they produced proliferate artistic objects, they never developed a conceptualisation of art. In effect, the cultural contents and items defined as ‘ethnic art’ were also seen as expressions of artistic ‘authenticity’. The backdrop to those interpretations in Europe was a historical moment of mounting ambivalence toward the modern project, and a sense of irretrievable loss or inaccessibility of authentic artistic energy and inspiration (cf. Mbembe 2019a). Pia Arke (2012 [1995], 337) shows how the colonial desire for the objects defined as ‘ethnic art’ solidified through their discursive association with access to “the primitive in the sense of the inspired”. Mbembe argues that the non-Western objects were “rediscovered” (and assigned artistic value) in the first half of 20th century. This shift came after decades (and centuries) of depreciation of non-European objects and artefacts (when they were seen by the Westerners as ‘monstrosity’, ‘dirt’, or ‘devilry’, etc.). It happened in response to what Mbembe calls the “modern crisis of experience,” or “the crisis of forgetfulness,” which is when Europe “has forgotten something fundamental about itself” (2018; 2019a). Non-European cultural objects became tied to hopes for the recovery of authenticity, identity and experience.

In 1920s, European and American interest in the Inuit material cultures blossomed into an art market. This included procurement of tupilak figurines produced by local Greenlandic artists (cf. Romalis 1983; 1985). The consumption of these objects in the West condensed a plurality of meanings, as they came to signify a material manifestation of universal human creativity and imaginative energy. The incorporation of Mitsuvirnianga’s tupilait in the Danish museal collections thus coincided with ideas about their ‘authenticity’. Such objects were taken to manifest artistic creativity, the “original human goodness” or “original nobility of man” (Arke 2012 [1995], 337), which was not (any longer) accessible to the European artist. Importantly, the colonial desire for these objects also produced heightened anxieties about their ‘future’, as the indigenous peoples were seen to be highly vulnerable to the impact of Western ‘civilization’ (something that Arke ironically dubs as concerns about the “external disturbances of the archaic Eskimo order” (Arke 2012 [1995], 337)). At the same time, tupilait figurines were caught up in an ‘fossilist’ colonial imaginary – they were material survivals or remnants of a world that had passed or was in the process of disappearing.

The Colonial Desire for ‘*det uberørte*’

In the history of Danish colonial ethnography William Thalbitzer personifies the desire to access cultures uncontaminated by Western civilisation (and perhaps also to protect them from the effects of civilisation). Thalbitzer studied English, Danish and Latin philology at University of Copenhagen, but his true passion was the study of “language[s] as unaffected as possible by European influences” (Oreskov 2006, 216). He “dreamt of researching the pristine” [*det uberørte*]; an object that remained intact, and untouched by the Western modern world (Oreskov 2006, 216). Thalbitzer’s first choice was to study native languages in Brazil, but he subsequently became convinced that “the study of Eskimo language had all that he sought after in terms of originality” (Oreskov 2006, 216). Thalbitzer’s interest and activities in East Greenland (a region colonised by Denmark only in 1894 – a century and a half later than West Greenland) were closely linked to this desire for the pristine and ‘the untouched’ (that was accompanied by an ironic lack of awareness that he himself was an participant of processes from which he was seeking to protect Greenland).

In an article “Grönland nu og för” (1932) Thalbitzer depicted Greenland as a place of struggle between transformative forces of the Western world and what had continually, if also provisionally, still remained unaffected by civilisation. The language of that article is a curious mix of spatial-temporal metaphors: “East Greenland is the land of the past, West Greenland [the land of] now” Thalbitzer wrote, while “the former [is] archaic and *archeological*, the latter [is] modernised” (1932, n. pag.). At work was a colonial imaginary of Greenland as a site of struggle between civilisation and its ‘other’ – that which civilisation threatens to devour, but which also has some capacity to withstand it.

There is a link between, on the one hand, the colonial infatuation with ‘nativism’, the procurement of the material heritage of the colonised people and object acquisition by imperial museums, and, on the other hand, the colonial project in the Arctic. Historically, the Danish colonial policies towards Greenland closely imbricated with protectionist and isolationist discourses, partly drawing its legitimacy from this claim of sheltering vulnerable of Greenlandic societies from the damaging effects of Western civilisation (Kirsten Thisted (2017a; 2017b) has given a perspicuous analysis of these discursive developments, articulating it as Denmark’s ironic imperialism).

In developing critical object historiography of Mitsivarnianna’s tupilait I also want to turn to a crucial event for their creation and procurement, namely the death of a child. As mentioned, a dead child’s teeth and eyes were incorporated in one of the tupilait. In Thalbitzer’s account, these infantile deaths remain

naturalized and unquestioned. But one could think of these deaths in terms of colonial effects: as an instantiation of what Mbembe calls ‘necropolitics’ – the operation of colonial social and political power that exposes the colonized populations to death through precarious living conditions (2001, 11). While we do not have knowledge of the exact circumstances of the death of the child whose teeth were incorporated by Mitsivarniannga into the tupilak, the broader context is how industrialized whaling and extraction of blubber in the 18th and 19th centuries affected Greenlanders’ traditional sustenance patterns and capacities. The Euro-American whaling trade resulted in dramatic reductions of these animal populations and led to the elimination of type of a whale from the marine ecosystem. The consequence was the need for the native communities to rapidly transition to less predictable sources of nutrition in the local economies. These developments could have devastating effects on local communities, resulting in periodical shortage of food, famines, and malnutrition, which likely increased child mortality. Mitsivarniannga’s tupilait could be seen as linked to these colonial necro-political effects, which become materially inscribed in its organic constituents (a child’s teeth or an eye). The tupilait as heterogeneous assemblages of parts are kind of testimonial objects in relation to processes that were rendered invisible. They inscribe onto material objects the effects of the disparities of power and historic violence that remains largely unacknowledged.

Conclusions: Tupilait as Mnemonic ‘Boundary Objects’?

In conclusion, I suggest that critical historiographic reading of Mitsivarniannga’s tupilait sheds light onto a set of cultural and political meanings and desires that marked the European reception of the Greenlandic tupilait objects. The tupilait became a site of plural and heterogenous imaginaries and entanglements structured by colonial relations. As such, they reflect not only what Paul Basu (2017) describes as ‘diasporic objects’ or ‘displaced objects’ (though they certainly have a translocational and diasporic history), but also constitute mnemonic ‘boundary objects’. ‘Boundary objects’ (Star and Griesemer 1989) are things spanning different social worlds, which they tenuously solder together, without enforcing uniformity between them. The concept can be productively applied to understand the connection between the tupilait and the colonial history and memory in the Arctic. As boundary objects, the objects have been created, invested with meaning and endowed with affect at the point of contact and encounter between plural peoples and plural histories.

Finally, this also helps re-envision restitution as a “foundation of a new relation” and as “learn[ing] to remember together” (Mbembe 2019a). As mnemonic boundary objects, these three Greenlandic tupilait are assemblages of plural material contents, signs, affects, narratives and temporalities, and as such they facilitate emergence of shared collective memories, without collapsing them into a singular unified ‘whole’. As such, critical attention to, and discussion of these objects, can open up new political and cultural possibilities, which build on the recognition that restitution is more than a framework of physical re-acquisition and re-location of heritage – it can also facilitate reparative relations and counter-memory to surface and develop. Against currently lacking shared Greenlandic-Danish memory of the colonial history they have in common, these boundary objects carry a promise and a possibility of a reciprocal and entangled (post-)colonial mnemonic space.

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