

# Child Abandonment as an Indicator of Christianization in the Nordic Countries

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## *1. Introduction: Typology of Nordic sources on child abandonment*

The pre-Christian religion of the Nordic Countries is often called Old Norse religion because of its sources, which derive mainly from *Norrøn* (N. Atlantic) islands and the coastal areas of Western Norwegian fjords. It was in this maritime area where the practice of writing down the early history of the settlements, chieftains and their families, wars and expeditions developed in the Middle Ages. The handwritten libraries of the *sagas* mainly describe the gradual process of Christianization which took place in Iceland and other maritime settlements over the course of centuries. Although the early saga historians were already Christian, the accounts reveal their ambivalent attitudes typical of this period of radical change.

Several sagas also describe the legal processes which took place in the early Icelandic parliament *Alþingi*, as well as in the local courts. One of the first issues to be criminalized by Christianity was the ancient custom of child abandonment. Interesting enough, this same issue is relevant in the first provincial laws written down soon after the formal conversion of the Swedes as well as the Church laws established by the Catholic Churches in Norway and Sweden.

The handwritten library of provincial laws never developed in Finland where a Finno-Ugric language, very different from the Scandinavian (Germanic) dialects was spoken, at least among the ordinary people. The Scandinavian type provincial system also developed, however, in this remote Swedish possession. The legal practices were based on oral tradition only. There are several descriptions of the criminalization of child abandonment in Finnish oral poetry. These runes, sung in the ancient trochaic *Kalevala* metre, bear clear testimony to the existence of sanctions against child abandonment in Finland. This paper in an effort to study child abandonment as an indicator of Christianization in the Nordic Countries on the basis of

three source groups mainly: 1. Old Norse sagas, 2. Swedish and Norwegian provincial and ecclesiastical laws and 3. Finnish runic poetry, all stemming from the Middle Ages.

## *2. Phenomenology of Infanticide and Child Abandonment*

Culturo-historical and anthropological studies (Lallemand 1885; Ploss 1911–12, 160–196; Schrader 1917–23, 65 ff.; Thurnwald 1926, 352–358; Montandon 1934, 655 ff., map 29; Potter 1949, 522 ff.) indicate that *infanticide* (violent killing of a child) and/or *abandonment* (leaving a child on its own, without using violence) have appeared in one form or another among many peoples, and at many periods of history. The tradition seems to have existed on every continent (Montandon 1934, map 29). In some cultures infanticide and abandonment have been practised up to very recent and even present times.

The motivations for infanticide in different cultures may be classified as economic, religious, social or biological. Food shortage and famine are the most usual economic reasons. Infanticide in such cases is a means of limiting the population; in some cultures it can mean the destruction of all the offspring, in others it may mean indifference towards the female offspring or the system of feeding only a limited number of children. The killing of the deformed may be excused on economic grounds; the question is sometimes considered from the biological standpoint (as a form of racial hygiene for example, as in ancient Greece) or socially (a monster cannot be accepted as a member of the community). When the grounds for infanticide are religious, it is often a question of ritualistic killing or the sacrifice of an exceptional child (the first-born, twins, one of twins, a baby born with teeth). Among cannibals, ritualistic infanticide often forms the central cult; on the other hand, it must be recognized that famine may also in some situations actualize the killing and eating of the cannibals' own children or those of others.<sup>1</sup>

The social aspect of infanticide is emphasized in the killing of an illegitimate child. There are in effect two facets to the question. Firstly there is the community and its norms which force the mother to kill her child because the child is not fitted for the community

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<sup>1</sup> Among the Ngali and Yumu, mothers abort themselves in order to feed the foetus to their living children during periods of famine. Devereux 1955, 14.

— the proving of the social fatherhood is in many cultures a fundamental condition for the acceptance of the child into the community. Secondly, especially in Semitic cultures, there is the situation where the individual commits infanticide in order to avoid social pressure upon herself and her child and in order to retain her status. The grounds for the killing of twins are, at the same time, moral. Only one of the twins is regarded as the mother's "own" child, whereas the other is the result of an "illegal" relationship, a relationship forbidden by the community. Thus, in many primitive communities (Potter 1949, 523), the position of a woman who has given birth to twins is similar to that of the unmarried mother in higher cultures. As a quite recent example, the information about infanticide among the Netsilik Eskimos collected in 1923 by Knud Rasmussen (Rasmussen 1931, 139 ff.) may be studied in detail. The Netsilik tribe had a total of 259 members, 150 men and 109 women. Rasmussen asked each of the 18 women of child-bearing age in the village of Malerualik how many children they had and how many they had killed. The 18 village women had given birth to a total of 116 children, of which 57 (58%) were still alive, 39 (34%) had been killed and 10 (8%) had died in other ways. Those killed were all female with the exception of one male who had been killed during a period of famine. Thus, 59% of the females were killed and 2% of the males. Of those left alive 73% were male and 27% female. The reasons for killing the females were primarily economic; providing food for a girl was considered to be nothing but trouble and expense. It seems possible to ascertain that a girl was only allowed to live if her parents had promised her as a wife to the son of another family. One reason advanced for the killing was the long period of breast feeding which among the Eskimos lasted 2 or 3 years. Breast feeding was thought to delay the next pregnancy by several years.<sup>2</sup> Because they wanted boys they hoped, by killing the girls, to add to the number of male children. The principal result of this is the gradual diminishing of the population (Rasmussen 1931, 139 ff.).

Among the Eskimos, then, the reasons for child murder were primarily economic. The abandonment of female babies may be seen as the result of an arctic hunting and fishing culture, in which the number of men capable of hunting and fishing is the measure of the wealth and social status of the family (E.g. Ruong 1959, 24-66).

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<sup>2</sup> The probable primary explanation is breach of taboo, since sexual intercourse before the child is weaned is forbidden in many cultures. Cf. Potter 1949, 523.

Privation and famine are the most usual reasons for child murder, and obviously also the oldest ones; this not only results in the abandonment of girls, but also to a general limitation in the number of children.

*3. Criminalization of Child Abandonment — an Indicator of Christianization in the Nordic Countries*

As far as the Nordic Countries are concerned, child abandonment seems to have been a commonly accepted social tradition until the acceptance of Christianity. When Christian influences reached the Far North, this old practice was gradually criminalized. The tradition was so strong, however, that it took a longer time before Christian authorities dared to oppose it strongly. This becomes very clear from the early sources. Child abandonment and infanticide are very widely discussed issues in Old Norse sagas as well as in Scandinavian provincial laws. From this point of view, the criminalization of child abandonment may be seen as an indicator of the strength and distribution of Christian influences in the various parts of the Nordic Countries. Legal historical sources can be supplemented by oral tradition material. When the old practice was criminalized by Christian sanctions and norms, the abandoned, murdered or aborted unbaptized children were experienced supernaturally. Their supranormal manifestations are described in Nordic folk beliefs and narratives concerning dead children.<sup>3</sup> The distribution of these tradition items reflects the encounter of Christianity with the Pre-Christian (ethnic) religions in the Nordic Countries. Under the Viking period, which coincided with the early Christian mission in Scandinavia, there were Scandinavian settlements over a considerably wider area than nowadays; outside the Nordic Countries, for example, Normandy, the Orkneys and Hebrides, Iceland, Greenland, Kiev, Archangel and Novgorod in Russia as well as on the western coasts of Northern American continent. From this point of view, one could speak of Scandinavian colonialism coinciding with early Christian Mission.

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<sup>3</sup> More thoroughly Pentikäinen 1968, 57–100.

4. *Barna útburðr. Abandonment of children in the Icelandic sagas.*

Saga tradition (Íslendingabók 1843–47, 1, 9–13; cf. Bugge 1910, 266 ff.; Hovstad 1943, 164; Wessén 1957, 30 f.; Bø 1960, 101) shows that in the year 1000 Christianity reached Iceland and was enforced legally by the Althing<sup>4</sup> which traditionally assembled at Lögberg. During the session for that year — and probably to avoid civil strife — an extraordinary compromise was made. The decision concerned the question of abandonment of children which was very relevant in connection with conversion. At the same time as it was agreed that all Icelanders should be baptized, a demand was made that “The old law” about the abandonment of children and the eating of horsemeat should remain in force.

“But he (Þorgeirr lögsögumaðr) ended his speech so that everyone agreed to have one law, that which he would read aloud (then). It was specified in the laws that all people should be Christians and accept baptism, including those who had earlier been unbaptized in that country, but the old law about abandonment of children should remain in force as well as that concerning the eating of horsemeat . . .” (Íslendingabók 1843–47, 1, 12). Saint Olaf reversed this decision and the abandonment of children and the eating of horsemeat was forbidden; this was probably in the year 1018 (Saga Ólafs 1825–37, ch. 59; cf. Pálsson 1932, 200 ff.).<sup>5</sup>

The first Icelandic sagas which tell of the abandonment of children concern the early part of the 10th century. Although the country was then still officially pagan, a clear Christian influence can be seen in the sagas. A disapproving attitude towards the abandonment of children can be seen and the custom is called “ancient”, “pagan”, “belonging to the past”. Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu (Gunnlaugs saga 1938, 55 ff.) tells how Þorsteinn, the son of Egill Skallagrímsson, when he sets out for the Thing, tells his wife to abandon her expected child if it is a daughter. The reason for this is a dream which foretold that

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<sup>4</sup> Alþingi, the Icelandic assembly, met annually in the summer from the year 930 onwards until 1798 in a place called Þingvellir in south-west Iceland. During the Free State this assembly was led by lögsögumaðr, whose task was to remember the unwritten laws of tradition. Lárusson 1956–78, 123 ff.

<sup>5</sup> J. Hovstad (Hovstad 1943, 164) mentions that St. Olaf forbade the abandoning of children and the eating of horsemeat as early as the year 1016.

a daughter would cause many misfortunes.<sup>6</sup> The wife, Jófríðr, opposes her husband, remarking that such a deed is improper for a rich man like himself. The author of the saga says: "There was a custom, when the country was still pagan, that those who were poor and who had many children to care for, allowed their children to be abandoned; and this was always regarded as an evil deed." (Gunnlaugs saga 1938, 56).

Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu describes the abandoning of a girl baby. It emphasizes, like the Finnboga saga (Finnboga saga 1959, 254 f.), that only the poor had the right to abandon children. Since both narratives tell of an attempt by a rich man to abandon his child, additional grounds for the action must be sought. Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu also contains the motivation of a dream about future misfortunes, whereas in the Finnboga saga there is a situation where a wife, against her husband's will and without his knowledge has allowed her daughter to escape with Skíði, "a man from the east". Among the reasons for abandoning children, the economic ones are certainly the most ancient. Yet other reasons can be found: in the Vatnsdæla saga (Vatnsdæla saga 1939, 97 ff.) a wife gives orders for the abandoning of a child which her husband has had by his mistress. Þorsteinn uxafótr is abandoned by order of his uncle because he was born out of wedlock (Þáttur Þorsteins uxafóts 1860, 252). Both sagas tell of the abandoning of an illegitimate child.

In studying Icelandic sagas it is useful to draw attention to the fact that they normally never describe the violent killing of children. It is true, as we have seen, that Harðar saga ok Hólmverja contains an incident where orders are given for the drowning of a child (Harðar saga 1945, 11 ff.). More frequently, the child is wrapped in clothes (Ála Flekks saga 1927, 85; Vatnsdæla saga 1939, 98) and carried to a lonely place or to a place where it could easily be discovered (Harðar saga 1945, 11 ff.). Þorsteinn uxafótr is so wrapped, then hidden under a tree root with a piece of pork fat in his mouth and finally carefully buried (Þáttur Þorsteins uxafóts 1860, 252). Þorsteins Þáttur Tjaldstæðings (Þorsteins Þáttur Tjaldstæðings 1904, 431 f.) tells of a man called Asgrimr from Telemark to whom a son was born just before he left for a Viking expedition. He ordered that the boy be abandoned and gave the task of burying the child to a slave. Even before there was time to lift the child from the floor, it began to speak, asking for its mother:

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<sup>6</sup> The dream motif in the saga may be a reminiscence of the international Oedipus tale. Schick 1832. Aarne & Thompson 1964, No. 931.

Give me to my mother;  
 I am cold on the floor;  
 where could be better for a boy  
 than by his father's fireside?  
 No need to sharpen the iron  
 or cut the turf;  
 leave your ugly deed undone;  
 I want to live longer with people.  
 (Þorsteins Þátrr Tjaldstæðings 1904, 431 f.).

We have here an episode very similar to that in the Finnish rune "Väinämöinen's Judgment" where a newborn baby starts speaking. Asgrimr then announces that the boy, "the relation", must be allowed to live. He allows the child to be baptized with the name Þorsteinn. The saga belongs to the Landnáma-period; Þorsteinn is one of those who moved to Iceland in approximately 900 A.D. because of the general taxation enforced in Norway by Harald Fairhair (Þorsteins Þátrr Tjaldstæðings 1904, 431 f.).

The ceremony of baptism, which included lifting the child from the floor and placing him in his father's arms (the phrase used was *borit at fǫður sínum* 'carried to his father') was in Nordic usage the most important rite of incorporation from the child's point of view (Reichborn-Kjennerud 1933, 83). The father in this way indicated his acceptance of the child into the family and confirmed its fitness for society by pouring water over the child and giving it a name. According to the Qrvar Odds saga (Qrvar-Odds saga 1892, 4 f), Lopthoena, who had just given birth to a male child asked that it should be taken to the father and given a name. Water was then poured over the boy, he was given the name Oddr. The necessity of giving a name as a sign of acceptance by the family is also reflected in those sagas which describe the finding of an abandoned child. Þátrr Þorsteins vxafots tells how a man called Krummr finds a child in the forest four days after it was abandoned. "He gave the boy a name, called him Þorsteinn (Þorsteinn uxafóts) and called him own son. He agreed to this with his wife." (Þátrr Þorsteins uxafóts 1860, 252). The phrase *ausa vatni*, 'to pour water over', is generally used when speaking of the ceremony of name giving prior to the advent of Christianity, whereas the term *skírn* 'purification', is used of Christian baptism (Møller 1940, 416 ff.; Hovstad 1943, 162 ff.).<sup>7</sup> The expression *vatni*

<sup>7</sup> The expression *scirn taca* appears for example in Íslendingabók meaning Christian baptism. Íslendingabók 1843-47, 1, 12.

*ausinn*, 'poured over with water', is always used in connection with the name-giving ceremony for a child which is intended to abandon (Snorre 1868, 124, 47, 90; Saga Ragnars 1829, 187 ff.; Qrvar-Odds saga 1892, 4 f.; Þórsteins Þáttr Tjaldstæðings 1904, 431 f.; Harðar saga 1945, 11 f.). The decision as to whether the child was to be kept or abandoned (the contrast is expressed by *foeda upp barn* and *bera út barn* (Vemundar saga 1843-47, 2, 248; Gunnlaugs saga 1938, 55 f.; Harðar saga 1945, 11 ff.) was actualized, at the latest, at the moment of name-giving or baptism. A child that for one reason or another was not accepted into the family and who was not given a name, was abandoned. Abandoning a child with a name was already regarded as murder in the pre-Christian period, Harðar saga ok Holmverja, which dates from c. 950 A.D., affirms laconically: "því at þat var morð kallat at drepa born, frá því er þau váru vatni ausin" ('it was called murder when children were killed after water had been poured over them') (Harðar saga 1945, 11 ff.).

A name is therefore the most important criterion of the child's acceptability in the community, according to saga tradition. But it is also true that a child that had been placed at its mother's breast, might not be abandoned (Reichborn-Kjennerud 1933, 84).<sup>8</sup> This rite of incorporation, in which the mother is made public, is central and must be regarded as very ancient. According to a Frisian saint's legend of pre-Christian origin (c. 700 A.D.) a child had to be drowned if the intention was to abandon it *prisquam lac sugeret matris*, 'before it had sucked its mother's breast' (Reichborn-Kjennerud 1933, 84). It is interesting to observe that name-giving and first feeding are also parallel criteria of a child's fitness for the community in Scandinavian provincial law, when a decision was made on the child's right (Maurer 1880, 30, 38, 49 ff.; Møller 1940, 316 ff., 417).

The expression "bera út barn" meant 'to carry out, to leave abandoned', and the opposite is "foeda upp barn", 'to care for the child'. *Barna útburðr* originally had the profane meaning 'abandoned, carried out (especially for a child)'. It was only with the advent of Christianity that moral ideas were changed and that a change in the meaning of the concept arose. It is clear in the sagas, which reflect the critical phase in moral outlook provoked by the arrival of Christianity, that the right to abandon a child concerned only those children without a

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<sup>8</sup> The ritual importance of breast feeding is stressed also in Nordic legal tradition. According to Norwegian provincial laws the last task of the midwife was to put the child to the mother's breast. Until this was done she was not given permission to leave the mother.

name. Whether or not the child was baptized before death was the criterion for the nature of funeral rites. According to Biskupa sögur

“The children who had not received *skírn* were to be buried outside the churchyard and earlier were buried far from consecrated ground like criminals, and were called by unlettered people *útburði*”. (Biskupa sögur 1858, 687). Later on, the word *útburðr* came to have a special meaning ‘a child buried in unconsecrated ground’. The supranormal meaning of this term is widely known in the Nordic Countries (Pentikäinen 1968, 190 f.).

##### 5. *Child abandonment in medieval provincial law*

From the point of view of legal history there is no sharp line of division between the saga tradition and the first Christian provincial laws. Although the sagas partly deal with the arrival of Christianity or the period preceding it, attitudes to child abandonment resemble in many respect the oldest provincial laws of Norway in particular. It should be remembered that like the sagas, the laws also lived for a long time in oral tradition and this gave much scope for changes. The distinctions are further blurred by the fact that both laws and sagas were written for the first time during the same period. The sagas were first written in the 12th century (*Íslendingabók* in about 1120) and the Norwegian provincial laws probably as early as the 11th century (the versions of the Gulating-, Frostating- and Eidsivating laws now lost): in Denmark the laws were first written down either at the end of the 12th or at the beginning of the 13th century (the law of Skåne 1202–16) and in Sweden in the 13th century (*Äldre Västgötalagen* 1280, a fragment exists dated 1240) (Iuul 1956–78, 228 ff.; Liedgren 1965, 231 f.). The source value of the sagas, from the point of view of legal history, depends upon the fact that they sometimes contain, in addition to information about legal customs and fragments of actual laws, clues to the history of the beginnings of provincial law and the development of lawmaking and the Thing, as well as the social context and actual applications of law.

The statute forbidding the abandonment of children was probably a part of the first church law in Saint Olaf's time. This can be surmised, firstly, from the placing of this paragraph immediately after the introductory formula and by the fact that there is an almost identical form of expression in the laws that follow; secondly, by the fact that Saint Olaf, after having become king, lost no time in

annulling the compromising decision of the Icelandic Althing in the year 1000. Almost all ancient Norwegian provincial laws categorically forbid the abandonment of a healthy child. On the other hand, one is not obliged to rear a deformed child (Norges gamle love 1846, 12 f., 339, 375 f., 303, 130 f.).<sup>9</sup> In the Gulating Law we find the following:

Magnus-text: ... every child that is born in our country is to be fed. Olaf's text: "Unless it is born deformed in such a way that the face is turned where the back of the neck should be, or the toes where the heels should be. Such a child must be taken into the church and be converted from paganism and laid down in the church and left there to die (Norges gamle love 1846, 12)."<sup>10</sup>

The Gulating Law lays down the following punishment for abandoning a child:

If someone abandons his unbaptized or baptized child and destroys it and is proven guilty of this then he has lost property and peace and we call this a great murder. And if a subordinate destroys his pagan or Christian child, then the master must flog him (her) skinless before the fifth day, or take him (her) to the king's men, or let him also have the right to sell him (her) outside the country (province) if he wants, and let him not mix with his people who eat together. But if he allows him to mix (with those who eat together), let him pay 3 marks to the bishop. But if the bishop or his representative accuses the man of destroying his child, either pagan or of Christian, and he denies this, then he must show himself to be innocent of this murder, as in other cases. But this oath outlaws him. But if the bishop or his representative has heard that he has buried a pagan child in consecrated ground and that which is a lie comes into the open, then the person who told it, must pay a fine of 3 marks to the bishop for his lie (Norges gamle love 1846, 12).<sup>11</sup>

Of the Swedish and Danish provincial laws the Gutalagen of Gotland (written down in the 1350s) is the only one to deal with the abandonment of a child. It is categorical: "Every child must be fed that is born in our country and it must not be abandoned" (Gotlands-lagen 1827-77, 7 f.)<sup>12</sup> It seems to be clear that through the influence of Christianity the abandoning of children was made a criminal offence at the time when the provincial laws of Sweden and Denmark were

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<sup>9</sup> Den aeldre Gulathings-Lov ch. 21-22. Den aeldre Borgartings- eller Vikens Christenret ch. 1. Den aeldre Eivathings-Christenret ch. 1, 5, 6. Den aeldre By-Lov eller Bjarkö-Ret ch. 1. Den aeldre Frostathings-Lov ch. 1-2.

<sup>10</sup> Den aeldre Gulathings-Lov ch. 21.

<sup>11</sup> Den aeldre Gulathings-Lov ch. 21.

<sup>12</sup> Gotlands-lagen ch. 2.

being written down. It is interesting that the punishments prescribed in the Gutalagen resemble rather closely the Norwegian laws.

It is therefore clear that between the saga and the Norwegian provincial laws there is only a difference of degree in the concepts concerning the abandonment of children. In both, abandoning is disapproved of, but at the same time it is allowed in special cases. In the sagas it is emphasized that the abandonment of a named child is murder. The provincial laws do not make any distinction here; abandonment is regarded as murder, whether it is a question of a baptized or unbaptized child. What is new in Christian provincial laws is the classification made by the church of various deformities in children and certain problems connected with the condition of the dead children in the after-life.

6. *"To the bog, said the family."*

*Abandonment of children according to ancient Finnish runes.*

The Icelandic sagas and Scandinavian provincial laws show convincingly that abandonment of children was part of the Scandinavian social system as late as the early Middle Ages. Did a similar institution exist among the Finns as well? As far as legal history is concerned, Finland is an interesting area where two nationalities with their different legal customs have come together and where, historically, Swedish law gradually displaced Finnish. Lack of historical sources makes it difficult to follow this process closely or to give precise dates.

A considerable part of the legal customs about which we have information is to be found in Finnish folk tradition, primarily in legends and runes, and is also known in Scandinavia. Examples are bartering for a bride, ordeal, duelling, blood feud, stoning to death as a punishment, as well as abandonment of children, which concerns us here (Virtanen 1933, 361-368; Pirinen 1956-78, 271-276). It is not always possible to decide, at least in the case of the oldest institutions, whether we are dealing with indigenous tradition or Scandinavian loans. The central difficulty is to determine the date of the tradition. This is complicated by the fact that a tradition or a motif may contain information of a certain custom, without necessarily proving the existence of this custom in a particular culture. The borrowing of the custom itself, and the independent tradition element must therefore be kept separate. In ancient Finnish runic tradition where abandoning of children is concerned we can see traces of both types of exchange. The following runes deal with our subject matter: "Väinämöinen's

Judgment”, “Marketta and Hannus”, “Boy or Girl”, “Grieving for her Birth” and the “Elegy of the Orphan”. The plot of the abandonment episode in “Väinämöinen’s Judgment”<sup>13</sup>, known also as the last poem of the Kalevala, is as follows:

They searched for a christener,  
all the people for a baptizer.  
A priest came to christen,  
Virokannas to baptize;  
he gave the name Joukamoinen,  
The name did not become a sure one.

Who was brought thither  
to be judge of that stupid deed?  
There is old Väinämöinen,  
he was brought in to be judge.  
“Let the boy be taken to a swamp,  
hit on the head with a billet.”

The boy says to Väinämöinen:  
“You were not taken the swamp,  
nor hit on the head with a billet,  
although you raped my mother,  
seduced my bearer,  
on the shore of shoals,  
on a gloomy, sandy spot!”

Then the old man, the foreigner,  
the Karelian Virokannas,  
christened the child rapidly,  
baptized the child quickly,  
king of Kainuu,  
guardian of Rahavuori.

A geographical examination of tradition shows that the phenomenon of child abandonment is known in one form or another throughout the area where runic tradition has been recorded in the Kalevala metre (cf. Hako et al. 1963, 27, map, 130–137). The independent existence of this motif in different runes and their wide distribution is a strong indication that the abandonment of children had a place in the legal systems of the Finnish peoples. In the poems there

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<sup>13</sup> According to the reconstruction of the contents by Martti Haavio. Haavio 1952, 187.

is reference to the abandonment of both girls and fatherless children, i.e. economic and social child abandonment, as is the case in Scandinavia. At this point, the Scandinavian and Finnish-Estonian traditions correspond so closely that the connection may be genetic. It is possible that the Finnish peoples adopted this custom from the Germanic peoples during the close contacts which began at about the time of the birth of Christ and which resulted in a renewal of the social and legal vocabulary of the Finnish languages (Itkonen 1958, 36 ff.). Because the connections with the Baltic peoples, which began at the latest in about 500 B.C., had not yet ended when the Germanic connections began, the distribution of the Baltic-Estonian-Finnish-Karelian poem "Grieving for her birth" may also be explained in this way. The loan theory is also supported by the observation of the Norwegian legal historian, Erik Solem, that no sign can be found of child abandonment having existed among the Lapps (Solem 1933, 63), who separated from the proto-Finns in about the year 500 B.C. The fact that the Lapps borrowed their dead-child traditions from neighbouring peoples (Pentikäinen 1968, 325-334) also points in the same direction.

### *7. Reports by Greenland missionaries in the 18th century*

The Norwegian Egede-family has a central position in the history of missions to Greenland. The pioneer missionary was Hans Egede. He went to Greenland in 1721, founded a colony there, learned the Eskimo language and worked among the Eskimoes until the year 1736. His son Poul Hansen Egede continued his father's work from the year 1734 until 1740, his place of work being Diskobukt on the west coast of Greenland (Egede 1939, I-XI). Poul Egede gained an expert knowledge of the Eskimo language and tradition. He kept a diary of his journeys and experiences<sup>14</sup>, containing detailed reports, not only about the phases of the missionary work and his personal experiences, but also information about the customs, folk beliefs, tales and legends of the Greenlanders; he also describes, for example, his meetings with *angákoqs* (shamans). In this connection three reports in the Egede diary about an *ángiaq*, the dead-child being known to Eskimoes, are of interest. On the 20th of November 1736 Egede tells of having heard

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<sup>14</sup> The diary of Poul Egede first appeared in 1741. In this study we use the version published in the Series "Meddelelser om Grønland". Egede & Egede 1939.

once again a peculiar story explaining why seal dogs (i.e. seal puppies) sometimes swim so far out to sea. I quote: "On the morning of the 20th, before I left them, they told me once again the peculiar story, concerning the reason why the seal-dogs sometimes go away from the land, and said that it was a thing which they called *Arnet angiet*; women's secret; a concealed thing; it was frightening and could not be seen, except by the *Angekoks*, who — screaming loudly in the middle of the day — run after it both inside and outside the house in order to catch it; and when they have got hold of it, the seal-dogs return. They did not however know what it was, but from the name and their description of it one can almost certainly conclude what the first man who invented it meant by it" (Egede & Egede 1939, 33).

Another report on the *ángiaq* is with a storm that raged for a long time on the west coast of Greenland in March 1738. The ice had floated far out to sea, seal hunting had become impossible and there was danger of famine. On the 14th March 1738 some Eskimoes came to Egede and told him that the reason for the famine was a woman. According to the *angákoq*'s explanation, she was supposed to have an *ángiaq* because whenever the woman had attended a meeting (led by the *angákoq*), the weather had been bad. The description contains the following definition of the *ángiaq*: the *ángiaq* is an aborted fetus (or premature baby) that is delivered in secret and becomes a being that flies. It causes rough weather, scarcity of seal-dogs among other things (Egede & Egede 1939, 58).

Egede heard in 1740 yet a third story about the *ángiaq* which three *angákoqs* had tried to catch at midday. The reason for holding the shamanistic ritual was, on this occasion, the scanty herring catch. The fish had in effect gone into the deeps. One of the *angákoqs* had at last succeeded in catching the *ángiaq*. It had resisted strongly, but gradually the *angákoq* had got the better of it. Nobody saw the *ángiaq*. The fierceness of the battle was however attested by the fact that the hands of the *angákoq* had become covered with blood. Egede mentions that some Eskimoes believed this and that others had accepted one of the explanations which Egede himself had given concerning the event (Egede & Egede 1939, 108). Egede, however, gives no further details in his diary of the explanation he used to rationalize the event in question.

In more recent materials the main emphasis lies in ceremonies describing the revelation of the *angiaq*. In the West Greenland narratives the *angákoq* exposes the guilty person by a *blood test*. The *ángiaq* is put above the women present. When the *angákoq* comes to the

guilty woman, some drops of blood fall upon her (Glahn 1784, 269 ff.; Rasmussen 1925, 180 ff.).<sup>15</sup> Rink's account, which does not include a blood test, is the only one to describe an interrogation of the guilty person (Rink 1866, 76 f.). There are, however, many narratives about the confession which follows the blood test and the revelation of the guilty one (Rink 1866, 76 f.; Rasmussen 1925, 180 ff.). The guilty person then reveals her crime. Sometimes the revealing of the father's name is also required (Rasmussen 1925, 180 ff.). Rink's narrative from South Greenland (Rink 1866, 279 ff.) differs from the others in that the *angákoq* simultaneously interrogates the women present, and questions the *ángiaq* about the matter, whereupon the *ángiaq* narrates the sequence of events. The *angákoq* asks: "Who is your mother? Tell me the name of your mother!" A child's voice answers: "Kakamak is my mother." The *angákoq* then asks: "Where were you born?" And is answered "On the island of Alangok." The sister-in-law tries at this stage to take the guilt upon herself: "Kakamak has not done it, I am the mother, tell me the name of your mother." To this the *ángiaq* answers: "Kakamak is my mother, I was born on the island of Alangok, I have killed my younger brothers." The usual description of the capture of the *ángiaq* follows. Glahn says that the Eskimoes believe that a woman having an *ángiaq* dies if the *ángiaq* is not caught (Glahn 1784, 269 ff.). Most often however the drama ends with the unmasking of the guilty person and her confession. When breach of taboo is the explanation of disease, the formula of the healing ceremony is in the main as follows; an interrogation is arranged, which is led by the healer himself, the patient and the audience having their own parts to play. All the possible offences against values which the patient might have committed are gone through in a process of elimination. The most important thing is that the patient openly confesses. After a detailed interrogation and confession, healing follows, although the patient is often given exceptionally strict taboo rules to follow for a time (Honko 1960, 63; cf. Boas 1979, 592 f.; Rasmussen 1929, 133-141).

When we compare the healing ceremony of breach of taboo with the unmasking of the *ángiaq*, many similarities may be observed. To illuminate the question I give the following figure in which the explanation of disease is 1) simplified in keeping with the healing drama of the Iglulik Eskimoes according to Rasmussen's account,

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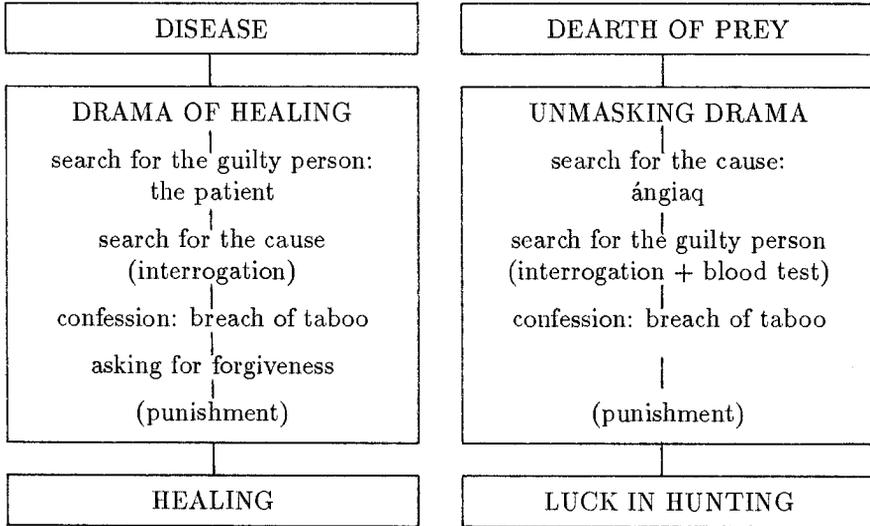
<sup>15</sup> In Rasmussen's record from Egedesminde we have the only case where the unmasking of the *angiaq's* father is referred to. The episode produced no result — the guilty person had moved elsewhere.

and 2) in respect of the ángiaq is an ideal type of revelatory ritual, reconstructed from many Greenlandic descriptions.

*Breach of taboo among the Eskimoes*

1. as an explanation of disease

2. as an explanation of death of prey



*8. The relationship between the ángiaq belief and the Scandinavian dead-child tradition*

It appears that the ángiaq belief is known of in the easternmost corner of the Eskimo settlement. On the basis of distribution, the idea that this belief belongs to an old Eskimo tradition must be refuted. There also seems to be another explanation: the Greenlanders may have adopted the belief later from some other people. From the Icelandic sagas it is known that Vikings of west Norwegian extraction made expeditions to Greenland as early as the year 900. A Norwegian, Gunnbjörn, is regarded as the discoverer of the island (Indrebø 1936, 138; Birket-Smith 1961, 22). Erik the Red founded in 986 a Norwegian colony on the south-west coast of Greenland, and later another in the region of Godthaab. Thenceforth, Scandinavian population was

permanently to be found on the east coast right up to the 14th century, and on the west coast until the 15th century (Indrebø 1936, 138; Birket-Smith 1961, 22).

If we abstract the explanatory pattern on breach of taboo which is unknown in Nordic tradition, it becomes possible to see many similarities between Nordic and Greenlandic Eskimo traditions. The following are the most important: 1) The *ángiaq* is invisible but 2) utters sounds like a new-born baby. 3) The *ángiaq* is predatory, 4) takes revenge on its relations, 5) sucks its mother like a vampire. It has 6) the power to frighten people to death. 7) The Eskimo *ángiaq* can raise a storm and in Scandinavia we find records in which dead children are omens of storm. 8) The *ángiaq*'s mother, like the child-murderess in the Nordic Countries, may be revealed by the ordeal of a blood test. The custom 9) of asking the being for its mother's (the guilty one's) name is also parallel. 10) One common element in explaining the *ángiaq* is the circumstance that the *ángiaq* is a secretly born, abandoned child or an aborted foetus, as is the case with many Scandinavian dead-child beings. The pattern of breach of taboo is generally missing in Scandinavian tradition. In the tradition of central Norway and in Härjedalen a belief is known according to which the *utburd*, a dead-child being, is 11) born from the after-birth that has not been hidden or burnt. The belief in dead-child beings appears in this case, to be a prop for the norm of handling the afterbirth. The question here concerns the same problem related to female blood as that in the Eskimo *ángiaq* tradition, although breach of taboo does not appear to be so important as among the Eskimoes.

These eleven parallel points and the eastern distribution of the tradition suggest that the *ángiaq* tradition contains motifs which originally belonged to the Nordic dead-child tradition. The Norwegians who lived in Greenland from the 10th to mid-15th century may be assumed to have been intermediaries in the tradition. The nearest parallels to the *ángiaq* tradition are indeed to be found in the west Norwegian tradition. In Greenland, the dead-child tradition developed differently and adapted itself to a different function from that in Scandinavia and was determined by the taboo-system characteristic of the Eskimo community. The existence of those Nordic elements in Greenland is a clear evidence of the Christian influences on medieval Greenlandic culture.

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