Arsarnerit: Inuit and the Heavenly Game of Football

Mark Nuttall

The genesis for this original essay lies in a footnote from a collection of academic articles about soccer published as Entering the Field: New Perspectives on World Football (1997), edited by sociologists Gary Armstrong and Richard Giulianotti. The editors mention ongoing research by Mark Nuttall—a social anthropologist at the University of Alberta, Canada, with expertise in the cultures and ecology of the Arctic—into the “centrality of football to the everyday cosmology of the Inuit in Greenland.” Recalling his travels to Greenland—known as Kalaallit Nunaat in the Inuit language—Nuttall for the first time fleshes out the ethnographic evidence for a unique football culture in a land traditionally considered too frigid to sustain a grass pitch.

The game, as Nuttall describes, has nevertheless taken hold in the belief system of Inuit culture. In the cosmic spectacle of the aurora borealis, the Inuit in Greenland see the souls of the dead playing football with a walrus skull—a long-standing mythology with variants among the Arctic region’s indigenous peoples. For the Inuit the northern lights are known, through this spiritual tale, as arsarnerit (the football players). The accounts below testify to football as a global game that reaches into the heavens and into myths helping to make sense of the universe—a universe, incidentally, that astronomers in 2003 hypothesized as being bounded, with a shape bearing a rough resemblance to a soccer ball.

According to the Danish Greenlandic explorer and ethnographer Knud Rasmussen, playing ball is “the Eskimos’ favourite game.” Rasmussen was writing in his 1929 study Intellectual Culture of the Iglulik Eskimos. Yet Rasmussen was not the first to observe this passion for a game that for centuries seems to have been played by Inuit on ice, snow, and tundra at the northern edges of the world. Football games were described in West Greenland by Hans Egede, the first missionary to reach Greenland’s coasts in 1721, and his wonderful 1741 account of Greenland and the life of Greenlanders contains perhaps the earliest illustrations of Inuit playing both football and handball. In The Central Eskimo Franz Boas described ball games (and recorded songs about ball games, including football) played by the Inuit of southern Baffin Island in the eastern Canadian Arctic during the 1880s:

The ball is most frequently used in summer. It is made of sealskin stuffed with moss and neatly trimmed with skin straps. One man throws the ball among the players, whose object it is to keep it always in motion without allowing it to touch the ground.

Writing in The Eskimo about Bering Strait in 1899, Edward Nelson noted that football was an important game for the widespread Inuit communities along the coasts and river deltas of western Alaska, with the ball made of leather and stuffed with deer hair or moss, and being played by young men and children at the end of winter or during spring. Nelson described how two participants act as leaders, each choosing a player alternatively from among those assembled until they are divided equally:

At a given distance, two conspicuous marks are made on the snow or ground which serve as goals, the players stand each by their goal and the ball is tossed upon the ground midway between them; a rush is then made, each side striving to drive the ball across its adversaries’ line.

Nelson also described variations on the theme:

Another football game is begun by the men standing in two close, parallel lines midway between the goals, their legs and bodies forming two walls. The ball is then thrown between them and driven back and forth by kicks and blows until it passes through one of the lines; as soon as this occurs all rush to drive it to one or the other of the goals.
He also noted that women played their own game of football during fall and winter using a considerably larger ball than used in the men’s game. Women’s football games usually involved four players, although there were occasions when there were as few as two players.

Writing in 1928, Christian Schultz-Lorentzen said that for Greenlanders the “game of ball has everywhere been a favourite sport,” explaining that it had been played in different ways, either as football or handball. Anthropologists have generally recorded that games are important for Inuit for three main reasons, all necessary for physical and cultural survival: first, games were played to help people develop strength, endurance, and resistance to pain; second, games were ways of acquiring knowledge about how to survive in extreme environments and for learning skills for hunting and fishing; third, games celebrated social life and culture. In Greenlandic stories, being able to play football with the entire skin of a large seal, stuffed with grass, was one of the attributes assigned to the ideal legendary hero as well as to great hunters who provided for entire communities. Strength in playing football, it seems, was an indication of skill, dexterity, success as a hunter, and the ability to perform heroic deeds.

Early observers noted how football was a sport, a game, something played for leisure, yet one that was competitive nonetheless. This competitive element of Inuit football was not confined to people playing from the same community or locality. In Greenland, Schultz-Lorentzen recorded that football was the game “for which combatants assembled from far and near” to win prizes. Possibly games between different groups along Greenland’s west coast were played during aasivit, traditional summer hunting camps where families from different areas gathered annually to hunt, fish, and trade. Aasivit were vital social and economic gatherings—social ties between families and groups from different areas were strengthened, news was exchanged, disputes were settled, knowledge about hunting was shared, myths, stories, and legends were told, and games were played.

In Canada’s Mackenzie Delta region, Knud Rasmussen recorded a tense football game between different Arctic peoples in the early 1920s:

Every summer, the Eskimos used to come up to Fort McPherson and camp on a great plain near the hill where the Indians had their tents. They played football on the plain, but on one occasion, trouble arose owing to the rough and unsportsmanlike behaviour of the Eskimos; the Indians retired from the game and the Eskimos struck camp and went off in anger. Next year they came again in great numbers, ready for battle, but the Indians, not wishing to give any occasion for bloodshed, moved into the bush with their tents and loosed their dogs.

Violence was thus avoided, but Rasmussen’s account speaks to the often difficult relations that existed between the Inuit and some First Nations in northern Canada.

During my travels in the North, especially in Greenland, and in my readings of the classic ethnographic literature on the Inuit, another type of football captured my attention. This is a heavenly version of the terrestrial game early observers of Inuit life described. Throughout the circumpolar North, brilliant displays of the aurora borealis (or northern lights) can often be seen on clear nights during the long, dark polar winter. Science explains auroral displays as the result of electrical discharges in the earth’s ionosphere. Solar particles, mainly protons and electrons, bombard and interact with the gases of the earth’s upper atmosphere. The aurora borealis has long fascinated travelers, who have been at pains to describe their feelings of awe, dread, and mystery when confronted with it for the first time. Its luminous glow of greenish white, red, or crimson light is more often described as a manifestation of the numinous in the writings of whalers, explorers, traders, and other visitors.

The aurora borealis occupies a prominent place in the mythology, cosmology, and spiritual beliefs of the Arctic’s indigenous peoples. For the Chuvan of Siberia, the northern lights bring relief to a woman in childbirth, while the Saami of Finland have a story that relates how the aurora borealis offers protection from sorcery and evil. A traditional Labrador Inuit story tells how at the end of the world there is a great abyss, with a dangerous pathway leading through a hole in the sky.
and on to the land of the dead. The souls of those who have crossed this path light torches to guide the new souls. In his 1916 classic, The Labrador Eskimo, Ernest Hawkes explained that only the spirits of those people who had died a voluntary or violent death had crossed this pathway. The notion of a voluntary death refers to an old practice of the old or infirm walking away from a village or camp in winter, or at times of starvation, so as to ease pressure on the group.

When I first went to live among Inuit seal-hunting families in northern Greenland in the late 1980s, I heard people tell many stories of how, when people die, their souls ascend to the heavens to form part of the northern lights. On journeys I make in Greenland today I continue to hear these stories. In Greenlandic belief, the person (tunuk) is seen as consisting of body (tomi), soul (tameq), and name or name-soul (ateq). The name is both a social and spiritual component of a person. Upon death a person’s name-soul leaves the body and is said to be “homeless” until it is recalled to reside in the body of a newborn child. A person who is named after a dead person is called an atsiaq (pl. atsiat). As this includes all people, then Greenlandic Inuit communities are made up entirely of atsiat. A dead person can have more than one atsiaq, but the first child to be born after the death of another person is called that person’s ateqqataa. It is during the period following the end of life, and before the naming of a newborn child, that a person’s soul becomes an arsartog, a football player.

In traditional Greenlandic belief, the land of the dead is a land of plenty. The souls of the dead feast and play football with a walrus skull as the ball (arsaq), and it is this football game that appears as the aurora. Indeed the Inuit call these shimmering curtains of light arsarnerit, “the football players.” In this way not only are the northern lights comprised entirely of human souls waiting to be reborn on earth; for the Inuit the word arsarnerit is devoid of any reference to light or solar activity. By playing ball in the night sky, the souls of the deceased remind the living that they are never too far away and are waiting to return home. The dead do not wish to remain apart from the living, so the arsarnerit communicate with them by whistling. A living person who hears this must reply with a soft whistle of their own, and the ball players will come closer to earth. The arsarnerit are to be marveled at, yet one must be fearful of the arsarnerit and not be too tempted to see how close they can come to earth. Without warning, children are told, the arsarnerit can swoop down and grab a living person. Even worse, they can pop off a person’s head. If the arsarnerit appear too close to the earth for comfort, they can be sent away by clapping one’s hands together loudly and firmly.

Similar Inuit traditions and accounts of the aurora borealis as football players are found across the Arctic from the Bering Strait coasts of Siberia and Alaska, to northern Canada, and all the way to East Greenland. In Alaska and the Canadian Arctic, they are known as arsarniit or aqsarniit, while in East Greenland they are arsamqs or alusukat. In West Greenland, Moravian missionary David Crantz in 1767 described the aurora borealis as “the souls of the dead striking at a dance or a foot-ball.” According to Hinrich Rink, in his 1875 Tales and Traditions of the Eskimo, after death the souls of West Greenlanders either traveled to an underworld of abundance or to an upper world where there was only starvation and cold:

Those who go to the upper world will suffer from cold and famine, and these are called arssartut or ball-players, on account of their playing at ball with a walrus head, which gives rise to the aurora borealis, or Northern Lights.

For the Inuit of western Alaska, Edward Nelson wrote in 1899 that the aurora is believed to be a group of boys playing football, sometimes using a walrus skull as the ball. The swaying movement of the lights back and forth represents the struggles of the players. When the light fades away the Eskimo utter a low whistle, which they say will call the boys back.

In Across Arctic America, his popular account of his epic three-year-long expedition by dog team, from northern Greenland across northern
Canada to Nome in western Alaska, to study the cultural, material, and intellectual life of Inuit groups in Arctic North America, Knud Rasmussen recorded his encounter with the Inuit of the eastern Canadian Arctic. He described the belief in the land of the dead as the land of glad and happy souls. It is a great country, with many caribou, and the people who live there live only for pleasure. They play ball most of the time, playing at football with the skull of a walrus, and laughing and singing as they play. It is this game of the souls playing at ball that we can see as the northern lights.

In *Intellectual Culture of the Iglulik Eskimos*, Rasmussen elaborated on the nature of the game:

The object is to kick the skull in such a manner that it always falls with the tusks downwards, and thus sticks fast in the ground. It is this ball game of the departed souls that appears as the aurora borealis, and is heard as a whistling, rustling, cracking sound.

For the Inuit of East Greenland at the end of the nineteenth century, Gustav Holm wrote that the aurora borealis represents the souls of deceased children playing football with their own placentas, with games being played between teams of children who have died violently or were stillborn and those who were orphaned. And in an interesting inversion of human-animal relationships, one Alaskan story relates how the *arsarnerit* are actually the souls of walruses playing football with a human skull.

Whatever its variations across the Arctic, this heavenly game of football is spectacular to watch. *Arsarnerit* appear almost nightly during the northern winter, and in northern Greenland I have stood and marveled with people as these astonishing games take place. People are not only spectators of this football game, they are living relatives of the *arsarnerit*. As the *arsarnerit* shimmer, swoop, and leap, people watch and discuss the game. They listen out for the souls of the deceased making a crackling sound as they run, chasing and kicking the football across the frost-hardened snow of the heavens. The souls of the dead players will ultimately be reborn. Names have power, and some of the personal qualities of the deceased are inherited by the receiver of their name. As *arsarnerit*, the souls of the deceased are “in training” for eventual rebirth. Because of the extreme physical conditions and climate, the Arctic environment is a dangerous and uncertain one. It is this game of football that is an important starting point for the acquisition of the strength and skill needed to survive back on earth. Indeed, when terrestrial football matches are played within and between villages, exceptional and gifted players are said to have honed their skills as *arsarnerit*.

In Greenland the appearance of the *arsarnerit* is said to be an indicator of the type of weather to come. The sky, both during day and night, is an important indicator of changes being observed by both scientists and Inuit. An elderly hunter once explained to me that the North is his *ulloriarstorfik*, his observatory. People throughout Greenland have told me about their concerns with the changing nature of *sila*—the Greenlandic word for weather, as well as a fundamental principle underlying the natural world—with the changes they have observed in the characteristics of the sun over the last fifteen years or so, and with the dimming and changes in the appearance of the aurora borealis. “The *arsarnerit* have not disappeared,” an elderly woman once told me, “they are simply moving elsewhere.” Scientists stress the importance of understanding how climate change in the Arctic is correlated with solar activity in both the lower and upper atmospheres. The appearance of the aurora borealis and the increase in major auroral disturbances (known as magnetic storms) are both linked to this, yet the precise mechanism relating solar activity to weather and climate change remains unknown.

The *angakkut*, shamans of old, would have their own accounts for the dimming or absence of the *arsarnerit*. Souls would often go astray, or evil hunters, sorcerers, and malevolent *angakkut* would often travel to the sky and the land of the dead to steal food. The souls of the dead would become famished and starve (*perierneq*). Unable to play football, the *arsarnerit* would soon appear pale and feeble, mere shadows of
56. On the Origin of Football

Miroslav Holub
Translated from the Czech by Ewald Osers

Czech poet Miroslav Holub (1923–1998), an immunologist with more than 120 scientific monographs to his credit, in his writing drew upon his background in medicine and biological research. Critics remark on an unadorned free verse described as “semantically exact” and well-suited to translation, while friends recall poetry readings staged in a historic Prague operating theater amid surgical instruments from the nineteenth century.

“I prefer to write for people untouched by poetry,” Holub says in an essay published in Vsetření Praha (The Evening Prague) in 1963. “I would like them to read poems in such a matter-of-fact manner as when they are reading the newspaper or go to football matches. I would like people not to regard poetry as something more difficult, more effeminate, or more praiseworthy.” References from the natural world appear in the poem below, as Holub suggests that passion for football might be primordial, extending even to the trilobite—the marine invertebrate from some five hundred million years ago.

The poem refers, too, to the way in which the game merits comparison to belief systems. Holub mentions the splitting of the curtain in the Jerusalem Temple as Jesus breathes his last (Matthew 27:51 and parallels). Such is the gravity of football given a daily experience of repression. And Holub’s range of association, given a lifetime of sparring with censors and Communist Party functionaries in the former Czechoslovakia, extends clearly to politics. Holub once described himself within the authoritarian system as “a non-person of the third order.” He had to publish anonymously at times, and his books and works were destroyed and cribbed by other poets. From this context comes the power of “an electrified wire / barbedy garrising” a possible football ground—the spirit of freedom and the everyday arrayed against a stalwart barrier.
THE GLOBAL
GAME

EDITED BY JOHN TURNBULL,
THOM SATTERLEE & ALON RAAB