

So Near ... So Far

Memory and Oral History in a Canadian Inuit Community

(John MacDonald - Finnish Oral History Society, Helsinki, November 28, 2014)



ABSTRACT: Canada's Arctic policies of the late 1950s caused Inuit across the Arctic to move from their traditional encampments on the land into permanent settlements established by government. Measured in geographical distance the move was negligible, but in terms of social and cultural displacement its consequences would be considerable and irreversible. The government-sponsored settlements soon isolated Inuit from their traditional life-style, while the relative autonomy they had enjoyed on the land was unwittingly surrendered to benevolent government agencies. In the settlement of Igloolik, Nunavut, Inuit elders, recognizing the extent to which the transition from the land to an urban setting had eroded their culture, language and traditions, established, in 1985, a community-based project to record and document the memories and experiences of their former life on the land. This initiative, still on-going, is known as the Igloolik Oral History Project. The paper describes the inception, development, and outcomes of the Project over the past thirty years, as a means to preserving Inuit cultural heritage in the face of rapid social change.

The oral history endeavour is sometimes perceived as a tacit admission of impending loss: loss of knowledge, loss of skills, loss of values, loss of language, loss of personal and collective histories - loss of identity. It begins with the realisation that an entire way of life is threatened by displacement, dislocation, or merely by change, whether embraced or imposed. In societies undergoing rapid



Igloolik Island, 300km North of the Arctic Circle

change, with no tradition, or means, of preserving their history, other than through oral processes, there's the added realization that much of their history resides, precariously, in the memories of a fast-diminishing number of elders.

Just such a realisation provided the impetus for the start of oral history work in Igloolik, a small Inuit community, situated some 300 km north of the Arctic Circle, in Canada's Eastern Arctic territory of Nunavut.

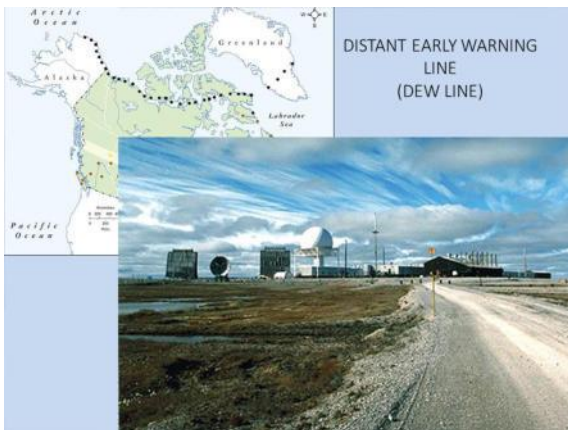
Until the late 1950s Inuit of the Igloolik area lived more or less autonomously in hunting camps dispersed along the shores of the Melville Peninsula and nearby Baffin Island. They co-existed in a long-established symbiosis with the traders and missionaries who, by the end of the 1930s, had established a permanent presence among them. Their dealings with traders revolved mainly around white fox trapping, an activity which had already altered their traditional subsistence patterns, gradually increasing their reliance on European goods, particularly firearms, traps, metal tools, and fabrics. The once luxuries of flour, sugar, tea, lard, and tobacco became essentials; and shamanism was abandoned in favour of Christianity. But despite the early acculturation brought by the traders and missionaries, much of Inuit traditional life was maintained. Extended families continued to live in their customary areas moving between camps in response to the seasons.



On the trapline, 1960

Subsistence still largely depended on seals and walrus, supplemented seasonally by caribou, fish, and migratory birds. Their dwellings, also seasonally dependent, were variously tents, igloos, and sod houses. Specialised knowledge of the local environment and its ecology, together with the skills necessary to exploit the land's resources, remained largely intact, and were passed down seamlessly to the younger generations. Importantly, their language, Inuktitut, was little affected; and many aspects of their intellectual and artistic life embodied in song, drum-dance, and story-telling - all more or less opposed by the missionaries - were nurtured quietly below the surface of Christian belief.

In short, by the end of the 1950s, most Inuit in the Igloodik area - and indeed throughout the eastern Arctic - were still living in a state of "semi-self-sufficiency", their relationship with Canada's distant, dominant society mediated sporadically and unevenly through the traders, missionaries and a few patrols of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. Over the decades the presence of this vanguard from the south was incorporated into the Inuit world view, achieving a seemingly permanent equilibrium. Inuit believed themselves to be autonomous. Life on the land, with all its apparent hardships, continued unhindered. Meanwhile, in the mind of the larger Canadian public, the Arctic and its Inuit crystallized conveniently into a vaguely romantic image of stoical isolation set in the distant snowy wastes of the North.



DEW Line site at Hall Beach, near Igloodik

This picture, however, gave no hint of Canada's imminent awakening from the absent-minded neglect that, until now, had characterised its Arctic policies. Suddenly, a number of northward-looking events occurred almost simultaneously, bringing the Arctic into closer focus. In 1954 construction began on the Distant Early Warning Line – the so-called DEW Line - a string of defensive "Cold War" radar stations built by the Americans across the

Arctic from Alaska, through Canada to Greenland. This remarkable feat of engineering brought unimaginable access to the region in terms of transportation and communications.

The following year the government belatedly announced its intention to make Inuit full participants in Canadian society. In 1958 the then Prime Minister, John Diefenbaker, declared his “Northern Vision”, a call to action aimed mainly at exploiting the Arctic’s rich mineral resources. Popular books published in 1952 and 1959, by the Canadian writer Farley Mowat, vividly depicted hardship and starvation among Inuit living on the barren grounds west of Hudson Bay. These accounts, along with alarming reports of epidemic levels of tuberculosis among Inuit, resonated with the Canadian public. Political expediency spurred the government to action: action which would for ever alter the conditions of Inuit life and livelihood.



Igloolik, 2009

With little or no consultation with Inuit, the government embarked hastily on its so-called “in-gathering” policy under which Inuit moved from their encampments on the land into government- sponsored settlements where state programs such as education, housing, health and social assistance could be more efficiently administered. Physically the distance of this move was insignificant; but its consequences would be overwhelming in terms of the social and cultural displacement soon engendered. Ill-considered, though doubtless well-meaning, the in-gathering policy soon began to take its toll on Inuit culture, language, life-skills, and identity. Unsurprisingly, Igloolik elders mark this move from the land as the starting point of an irreversible decline in their autonomy, culture, and traditions.

As the settlement of Igloolik grew to the size of a small town so did the proliferation of government agencies with their inevitable bureaucratic rules and regulations, most of them starkly in conflict with Inuit values. The crowding of Inuit into the close confines of the town strained relationships between families and undermined traditional forms of leadership. Authority was assumed by government administrators usually with little knowledge of the Arctic and scant understanding of Inuit society. Government-run schools - both local and residential - with



Emblems of regulation

their emphasis on southern curricula rapidly usurped Inuit learning practices. The distractions and demands of settlement-life combined to preclude the natural transmission of traditional knowledge to the younger generations. Inuit became increasingly sedentary, less inclined to hunt. Processed and junk foods from the south began replacing traditional country food. Unemployment, boredom, and malnutrition became endemic. Indicators of deepening social malaise expressed through drug and alcohol abuse and, tragically, in more recent years, through youth suicide, rose alarmingly. Within a generation or so settlement life had all but isolated Inuit from the life-sustaining environment just beyond the doorsteps of their centrally heated houses.

Nathan Qamaniq, an Igloolik elder, is convinced that Inuit culture cannot thrive within the soft security of a semi-urban setting:



Igloolik, c.2004

“You need to be outside the settlement in order to learn these things. You need to be away from this place. You have to endure hardship every now and then [...] it is a good way to learn. You need to travel over thin ice and face other dangers. We get everything so easy now and do not need to work hard ...”

(Nathan Qamaniq, 2002)

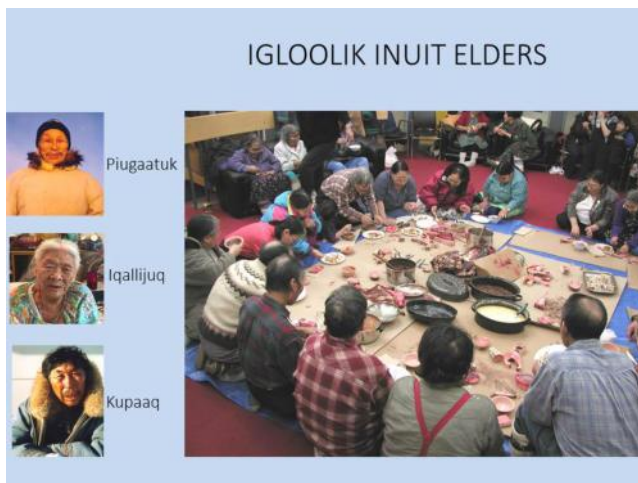
Qamaniq’s statement is more than nostalgia, more than an old man’s complaint. He, along with many others of his generation who have witnessed his people’s withdrawal from the land, deplors the concomitant loss of the complex knowledge and skills which enabled Inuit to survive and thrive independently in one of the world’s harshest environments. It was precisely this pervasive sense of loss that became the catalyst for the Igloolik Oral History Project beginning in the mid-1980s.

The next decade would see the negotiation of the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement in 1993, followed by the establishment of the Nunavut Government in 1999.

These significant political achievements, in part predicated on the need to preserve Inuit language and culture, were touted to give Inuit greater control over their lives. In this spirit a delegation representing Nunavut’s elders and youth recommended that the newly-created government institute an oral history program, based on the Igloolik model, to systematically gather traditional knowledge from every community across the Territory. Given the advanced ages of the Inuit knowledge-holders, urgency for this program was stressed. But the government, pleading more pressing priorities declined to act. While other community-based traditional knowledge projects have since been implemented in various parts of Nunavut, with a few notable exceptions, most have been haphazard and short-lived. None has matched the longevity, accessibility and influence of the Igloolik Oral

History Project.

The Igloolik Project had its formal start in 1986, following a meeting of the community’s elders where there was full agreement on the necessity of recording and documenting the community’s traditional knowledge. The “target” elders for interviews would be those who had spent their formative years “on the land”, who were recognised by their peers as having a thorough knowledge of Iglulingmiut traditions, and who were best able to



Elders attending a Christmas Feast

communicate this knowledge. An overarching aim of the project was to record the interviews in accurate, nuanced Inuktitut with all its richness and specialised terminology. Elders made the crucial point that only through the proper use of Inuktitut could their culture and traditions be adequately communicated. Specific goals included recording personal and family histories and compiling a record of local traditional knowledge and life-skills. A decision taken to translate the interviews into English was based on the elders’ deeply felt sense that the wider world should have unfiltered access to first-hand accounts of Inuit knowledge. This decision reflected elders’ concerns that researchers, particularly biologists, were dismissive of Inuit specialized understandings of the environment and its ecology.

From the elders' stance, professional biologists relied solely on western science to inform their research conclusions which often shaped – adversely from the Inuit point of view – the government's policies and regulations on wildlife management.

Employees of the Igloodik Research Centre (then a federal government agency) coordinated the project on behalf of the elders, assisting with a range of tasks including fund-raising and financial management. They also conducted interviews, provided translation services, and undertook documentation and archiving tasks. Interview topics were



Igloodik Research Centre

suggested variously by the elders themselves, by the staff of the Igloodik Research Centre, and by visiting researchers from the south. This approach necessarily involved a mix of interests which proved highly productive in eliciting diverse categories of information. To a greater or lesser degree, interview topics covered virtually all aspects of Inuit social, cultural, economic, spiritual, and artistic life. Audio-taped interviews were usually planned a day or two ahead of the session, giving the elder time to prepare. Prior to the interview a waiver form was completed ensuring informed consent. Apart from keeping the interview within the bounds of the agreed topic very little structure was imposed on the session. A conversational flow was encouraged in which the elder responded to a question fully before the next question was asked.

A productive technique used by the Project involved elders interviewing each other. The resultant interview - really a discussion between two specialists – usually attained a much higher level of discourse than that deriving from an interview conducted by a younger, less knowledgeable interviewer. “Self-taped interviews”, where elders recorded their own life histories, were also used successfully.

Every effort was made to have the audiotape translated into English as soon as possible after the interview when the session was still fresh in the minds of both the interviewer and the elder. In the course of translation, all specialized, technical, and archaic terms were noted and explained fully, later to be included in lexicons.

The collection - now standing at some 600 interviews, each about an hour in length, - is accessed in three ways: by listening to the Inuktitut audiotapes, by reading transcripts, or by viewing the English translations on a computer monitor. Using various word-search programs it is possible to quickly locate all references to a given topic occurring in the entire collection.

Having done this, the user has the choice of referring to the audiotapes identified in the search, reading the interview printouts, or simply browsing the appropriate files on-screen. In keeping with the elders' wishes, generally unlimited access is permitted to the collection.



Educational CD deriving from oral history materials

The interviews are widely used. Educators in Nunavut value the collection, viewing it as an almost boundless resource for curriculum-development in the Eastern Arctic.

School books, readers, and CD's deriving from the interviews are published and circulated throughout the region.

Researchers, particularly those engaged in the social, biological and environmental sciences, consult the interviews regularly. The richness of the material they encounter often challenges their naive assumptions about the value traditional knowledge. Over the years a number of monographs, theses, and numerous academic papers on Inuit culture and society have been published in Canada and abroad based on the elders' interviews.

Museums, including the British Museum in London and the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington have, as a direct result of their use of the Project's materials and their collaboration with its contributors, fundamentally revised the ways in which they represent Inuit culture.



Leah Otak instructing British Museum conservators on handling of Inuit clothing



Igloolik Inuit at the opening on the NMAI in Washington

Inuit are no longer presented as curiosities from the ethnographic past, but as a living people striving to make their way in the contemporary world.

The basic methodologies used in the Igloolik Oral History Project have been employed in similar projects across Nunavut and further afield including Finland, where environmental researcher Tero Mustonen has adapted what he terms the "Igloolik model" to his oral history work with Finnish fishing communities in Karelia and with the Skolt Saami in Northern Finland.

For all this, however, the Project remains, first and foremost, a community resource for the people of Igloolik. Through the interviews, Inuit personal names and the complexity of the relationships they embody are rediscovered, as are the place-names and the attendant histories of their traditional lands surrounding the settlement.

Children explore with wonder and pride how their grandparents lived; young, aspiring hunters learn something about sea ice conditions and wayfinding, and Inuit teachers inform themselves about language use and local history. The audio-taped interviews are also cherished by family members to



Children performing during the Sun's return Festivities

whom copies are given on request, and each Saturday morning elders' recordings are broadcast to an enthusiastic audience over the community's FM radio station. Another important outcome of the Project, not foreseen at beginning, is the community's re-enacting of long-abandoned traditions, including festivities observed on the Sun's return after winter darkness, an annual celebration promoting traditional games, drum-dancing, and dress. In these ways, the Project helps to reaffirm Inuit identity and community solidarity.

Realistically, however, the Project is not about revival - though some revival there has been - but about preservation; about leaving a record of lives lived, and the knowledge and skills needed to live these lives. Such records are inevitably incomplete. Nevertheless, over many years, the Project has documented sufficient information to construct a vivid and coherent account of a way of life precipitously and irrevocably lost. Crucially the account is given in the voices and language of those who lived this life. Had the Project not existed, the history of this period would largely reside - biased and fragmented - in police patrol reports; in traders' and missionaries' journals; in academic papers; and in the travelogues of itinerant visitors from the South. The Project's interviews, in aggregate, stand both as a foil and as an essential complement to the filtered narratives of outsiders, ultimately giving the people of Igloolik a proud and authentic voice in their own history.

