



INUIT – A Struggle for Cultural Space

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- *Greenlandic experiences in maintaining cultural heritage, or failure in doing so.*
- *What succeeded and what didn't: reflection over the postcolonial period and Home Ruled Greenlandic cultural politics and the new demands caused by the direct impacts of human induced climate change.*

At a cultural meeting in Bolivia in February 2006, between Aymara and Quechua and Inuit artists, a former minister for education in Bolivia took me aside and said: "There is no doubt, we were once the same people!" According to a controversial genetic survey of the evolution of humankind done by University of Chicago scientists, and featured in the March edition of the National Geographic this year, we all descend from a group of people in Africa. They claim that among these peoples, one group went north to Europe, another group went via Arabia towards Asia – some Asians went further to what we now know as the Americas – some migrated southwards to inhabit North, Meso and South America, and some went along the Arctic coast to Greenland. If that is true, then here we are, the Greenlandic Inuit, presently with 56,000 inhabitants. With the other Inuit in Canada, Alaska and Chukotka, we amount to about 130,000 individuals with our old culture, language and history.

In the summer of 1984, we visited Qasigiannuit in the Disco Bay, West Greenland. We arrived to great celebrations for the commemoration of the 250 years anniversary of the establishment of Christianshåb, a Christian mission and Danish colony dating back to 1734 and named after the Danish King Christian VI. While we were in the middle of the festivities, the national radio news announced that an old village discovered by the archaeologists in the archipelago of Qasigiannuit proved to date 4,500 years back. Until my grandparents' generation, we were traditional hunter-gatherers: we have archaeological findings along the 1,833,900 km length of coast of tools and housing remains, which date up to 4,500 years back.

It is not a coincidence that these old villages are often found near the present towns. The conditions for an Inuit settlement are good hunting resources, a good harbour, a water source and a view of the of the sea.

In the first World Culture Report from 1998, in which both Ole Henrik Magga from Sápmi and I contributed to a discussion about the situation of indigenous peoples, the director of UNESCO at that time, Federico Mayor, questioned the prospects of the more diverse cultures in an increasingly interconnected world that is undergoing extraordinarily rapid change. Federico Mayor answers his own question by saying: “Uniformity is often seen as the inevitable result of the processes of globalization that are so strongly marking the end of the century. But we are also witnessing a trend towards fragmentation, which drives people apart. What is certain is that we cannot afford to lose any of the world’s multitude of cultures and their survival depends on their peaceful and creative co-existence.”

Further to this Federico Mayor says, “Complex systems draw their strength from diversity: genetic diversity in a species, biological diversity within an ecosystem, cultural diversity in human communities. Each culture constitutes a unique mode of interpreting or relating to a world so complex that the only hope of knowing it or dealing with it is to approach it from as many perspectives as possible. Our task is to ensure that people enjoy freedom for their own culture and have knowledge and understanding of other cultures. In both cases, this can only be accomplished through an active and positive respect for the differences between all cultures whose values are tolerant of others. It is a task we all share, from the individual level to government and international level. The success of this undertaking depends on the shape our common future will take.”

Asineq, a thinking man from East Greenland, explained that the spoken word is the greatest power human beings have, because with words we can give joy or hurt one another for life. He illustrated this using the image of a wound made by a weapon, something that would still be visible after healing but would not hurt as much as a word that was once uttered.

Thus Asineq, an old East-Greenlander, explained to the polar explorer Knud Rasmussen how the word is the greatest power a human being has. We believe in “oqaatsip kiminga” or “the essence of the Word” as something that has an inexplicable power. “The Word is magic.”

There is a close relationship between language and power. Literacy and Enlightenment came to Greenland in the 18th century, thus making it possible to build a system of education, administration and politics upon the native language, Greenlandic.

I believe that political power must address the question of how to link the survival of our language – Greenlandic – and the present nature of our society as a multicultural and a multilingual society.

The Kalaallisut language is the least threatened language among the Inuit. The children in Greenland speak, read and write Greenlandic. And it is used as the language of instruction in the primary classes in school. That is not the case in other Inuit areas as Canada, Alaska and Chukotka, Russia, where the struggle is to teach it to the children. They struggle against the influence of world languages like Russian and English; at the same time they need these languages in order to progress and get educated. As the Minister of Culture and Education in my country (2003–05), I presented the cultural policy review to our Parliament in which I proposed that electronic media, film and theatre were the priority areas in our efforts to develop a cultural policy.

The big money invested into the bilingual education system has only slowly shown signs of giving a competent education to the native Greenlanders. Early problems of people “dropping-out” from the education system is something we have in common with many other former colonies, where the education systems are not made to suit the demands of the culture and people who are to be educated. Of the new children starting school, 80 % speak only Greenlandic, 12 % speak both Danish and Greenlandic and 8% speak only Danish. As recently as 2002, a new primary school system was initiated. Made in collaboration with other nations, it was shaped after Greenlandic demands but was also a very international project. The point is that the US – with scholars and educationalists from Alaska, the State of Washington and California to name a few – has been and still is a key player in the process. Our understanding is that it is crucial to consult scholars and educationalists abroad because we have been dependent on Denmark for too long.

In my opinion, culture is of a fluctuating nature, always in transition. In Greenland, we have a co-existing modern culture as well as a traditional indigenous one. More than anyone else present here today, we in Greenland know what it means to be forced to give up your spiritual values. Hundreds of

lives have been lost due to suicide among youngsters since the 1970s. Juvenile suicide at the scale we know it is evidence of the tragedy of loss of meaning and purpose in the transition between former times and modern times.

Our intellectual property is in our cultural heritage, but also in our contemporary culture. We have succeeded to a great extent in maintaining that. If we were to grow more self-determined in Greenland and to begin to exercise this self-determination, I believe we could develop a richer culture, not necessarily in an economical sense but rich in expression and influence. Our goal is a culture of peace, negotiation and sharing.

Particularly since the 1950s, we have felt ourselves to be the objects of foreign scientists' research and informants for much of their knowledge and their theses. The reaction against that trend is to get more feed back from that research, greater demands to social science to beat and solve the problems in the society. We know the importance of studying our environment as a unique and exciting source of knowledge, especially in the light of climate change. But we want to participate in defining the needs and priorities of the research. Therefore, we are building a new university campus in Nuuk, not only to elevate the educational level in Greenland, but to also offer a place for scholars from outside to do their research and studies in our own educational institution.

It has always been something of a headache for the Danish colonial power to think of how to make an economic development feasible in Greenland. There are enormous distances between the settlements; even today with airborne traffic and ship transportation, the cost is very high making the products expensive, which makes the salaries accordingly high. The export products during the colonial period were originally seal blubber and whale oil, whale bone and fur of the animals that hunters caught, especially fox, polar bear, eider down, salted fish, ivory, coal, graphite, cobber, marble, lead, zinc and after the 1860s cryolite. The introduction of cod fishing in the 1920s meant an income increase, which was welcomed both by the local people and the Danish state. Greenlanders had access to loans for buying small fishing vessels, and salted codfish became a new export item until the water temperature changed half a degree, which made the cod fish disappear. After the "cod fish adventure", as it is sometimes called, shrimp fishing and export started in 1950. This has meant a move in the development of Greenland's economy with more women became economically independent. Today, Greenland is the biggest producer of cold sea shrimps in the world with over fifty fishing vessels of more than eighty BRT each.

Fish, shrimp and crabs now constitute the bulk of Greenland's export, which is supplemented by the Danish block grant amounting to DKK 3.1 billion (2006). With the price on crude oil rising and high wages in comparison to countries like China, Thailand and even Europe, Greenland's economy has a tough job competing.

The fishing policy is that Greenland's fishing industry derives from clean seas and has a sustainable development policy.

In the age of environmentalism and panic over the results of global warming and climate change, Greenlandic hunters are increasingly accused of being a threat to global resources. But the truth is that the hunters are the ones who have the traditional knowledge and expertise in the practice of dealing with nature. It is in fact the hunters who have the key to implementing sustainable development, which could contribute to the environmental debate by integrating scientific knowledge with the traditional knowledge deriving from their hunter society.

The issue of respect for nature, animals and sharing are not restricted to the past. I can inform you that my people have adopted the principle of sustainability as a general policy, especially in the field of primary education.

One important branch that has grown from the hunting tradition is the production of food to the home market and the seal skin industry. While previously almost all needs were provided by the catch, i.e. food, boats, accommodation, clothing, today we continue to hunt to have food on the table and use the by-products of the catch for clothes. In the 1970s, animal rights activists attacked the seal skin products that resulted in a drastic decline in the sale of seal skin as a by-product for the hunters. That was the last blow to our hunting culture. That started the drastic decline of an old profession. From the 1980s onwards, a domestic small-scale industry was eventually re-built exporting fur produced with the help of modern designers. This spring, however, it became known that Great Greenland, our tannery, also imported Canadian seal skin partly due to the fact that they could not get enough seal skin from Greenland due to our small catch. This has also aroused international criticism of our hunting industry. But we do not catch the seal for its fur alone; it is our traditional diet and also constitutes a sustainable food for the dogs in the hunting areas. The high dependency on sealing means that any international campaign will substantially influence the livelihood of hunters and fishermen in these places.

A recent research conducted by lector Rasmus Ole Rasmussen from Roskilde University, Denmark, stated that the number of what we could call “full-time hunters” is declining rapidly. Between 1993 – 2002, the number of hunters dropped from 6,560 to 3,083 and dropped again in 2003 down to only 1969 people. Traditional hunting knowledge, both male and female, was passed down from generation to generation. A recent analysis shows that several hunters’ families now live under the poverty line. This is probably due to the uncertainty of the living conditions and increasingly strict regulations on their industry, for instance smaller quotas on their traditional prey such as polar bear, caribou, muskox and sea birds. Moreover, lack of ability to generate a surplus makes general maintenance and new investment in equipment and tools difficult, if not impossible. Rasmussen concludes that the high dependency on sealing means that any international campaign will influence the livelihood of hunters and fishermen in these places substantially. Lack of alternative income sources during the seasons, where hunting is limited, and inconvenient social laws make this old profession a hard trade. Today, the hunters’ families encourage the new generation to take a different educational path.

The Greenland Home Rule authorities have also formed a steering committee now working on how to reverse this situation. A co-management system between hunters and biologists is wanted and alternative income sources are sought for, including tourism, new species and hunting methods, trophy-hunting, development-oriented micro-finance schemes and subsidies, education in hunting and re-education in other ways of generating income, awareness on the difference in available resources and management and working out better legal bases to receive subsidies from the authorities.

While we now look more to the men’s situation and the problems they are facing, women have taken another step forward. It is the women who are the ones forming the majority in the educational institutions. In high schools, universities, teacher’s colleges, press, and even in the parliament, women are storming in. In the last national election in 2005, women got 35 % of the seats – from 0% in the dawn of Home Rule, in 1979.

A project under the Arctic Council is working with *Women and resource management in the rural North*, and will report to the Arctic Council’s ministers meeting in the fall of this year about, among other things, women’s role in the management of natural resources, the development of tools and strategies and increased transparency in the decision-making processes. Although the project

mostly concentrates on fisheries, some of the facts are similar to those of the hunters, i.e. that women in Greenland are the ones who get educated and move out from the small communities to the urban areas. In the hunting community, women traditionally played a very important role in the management of the resources and in generating income. According to numbers from the Department of Hunting under the Greenland Home Rule, most households engaged in hunting and fishing generate more than 50% of their income from other sources than hunting and fishing, which in other words means that the wife in the household often contributes with the largest income.

Although it has been late in coming, a hunters' education is finally under construction. When I talked to two hunters (aged 48 and 54) on a national radio programme in May this year, I was astonished about their courage as they told me about their hunting practices. They told me how they communicated to each other via satellite (GPS) and traveled in small boats to the West Ice, which is the solid ice between Canada and Greenland. They ensured me that the hunting culture will never die. What occurred to me is that a part of their motivation for having chosen this harsh livelihood is also their love of nature – “inulaarsuarmiinneq”. This is our relationship to our land, which seems to be impossible to shake off from our bodies and minds; for us the environment is indeed a very important part of our Inuit culture. There are new negotiations between Denmark and Greenland about greater autonomy. Not surprisingly, the question on land and resources is the most difficult issue.

However, there are other threats. Sheila Watt Cloutier, the president of the Inuit IPO, ICC, says she fears for her people. She is referring to the high suicide rate and the tendency to self-destruction we all have witnessed during the struggle to modernize. Now, the climate change is the last straw. To the outside eye, the Arctic environment seems harsh and unforgiving, but to us, the Inuit people, it has provided all we need to thrive sustainably. Our health authorities have started to advise us not to eat certain elements of our traditional diet during pregnancy because of contamination from POPs. The situation is quite serious. “Therefore,” she says in an article, “with the utmost humility, all I can say is that the world’s decision makers should come and live with us for a while. We have a lot to teach the world about getting along together and about respecting the land.”

Cultural policy must assist in ensuring the creation of a society that is deeply rooted in its own history and must create visions and hope for its own future

through active and informed practitioners in the present. Cultural policy must provide good conditions for our intellectual, emotional, ethical and spiritual development, thus enabling us to meet and contribute to the world with a positive feeling towards our own identity.

Culture is not a matter of statistics, but a phenomenon which is dynamic. The kayak, the umiak (a traditional open skin boat usually rowed by women in the old days) and the national costume are all important symbols of our culture, but they are also the results of historical and cultural development. We live in the present with an old culture, a culture we want to develop and share with the world around us.

We believe that the world around us is just as interested in us as we are in it. We produce music and we design clothes, taking inspiration from the entire world. This produces results, which not only we, but also others, find fascinating. In this way, cultures meet and this often results in new and exciting things. Therefore we must encourage traditional as well as modern, international cultural ways of expression within all spheres, such as sport, theatre, art and literature. We must start from the place we are in and integrate the new as our own.

Greenland is in the process of taking measures to further the evolution of the Greenlandic language used in administration and education into a modern national language, by means of establishing international professional terminology. This too must be seen as a part of a cultural policy that promotes the strengthening of our own cultural foundation both inspired by and mirroring the new, foreign influences. Today, we believe that we will not lose our language but, on the contrary, we will preserve it by letting it develop, even under the influence of other societies. We are proud but modest about the fact that our Inuit language has become the national language of Greenland, used in public radio and television, theatre, printed press and films, that our primary education is in our language and that our music and poetry is flourishing. For over twenty years now, we have had cooperation with the Nordic Council and have had a welcome support to translations of Nordic literature into our native language. We have not yet had any Nobel Laureates, nor has it been the goal, but who knows – “Puilasut pikialaarput”, (The Springs are Flowing), as our poet Moses Olsen writes in one of his beloved poems, and perhaps one day a new writer will be born among us and write an internationally renowned book in the Inuit language.

In cultural policy, interaction between the generations is important and the young are an important resource. Young people are freer in relation to their actions and attitudes, whilst the older generations are, understandably, bound to a greater extent by tradition. The young have the key to our future culture and have the opportunity to create an extremely exciting society by developing our own culture in interaction with cultures outside Greenland. So for their best, we want them to be well educated at the same time as being well versed in our own culture and traditions. That requires more mutual understanding with and respect from the rest of the world.

Sources

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