

Our Ancestors Are Happy

Outside the temperature is –23, much colder with the wind-chill factor, but inside the atmosphere could not be warmer. About 100 residents of this small town of 1400 are gathered for what is, north of the Arctic Circle, an extraordinary event. On the surface, it is a celebration of a new book, about the profound and spiritual relationship between Inuit and seals. Underlying that purpose, is a layer of much greater significance. Those present know that, in some indefinable way. Everyone in town who cares in their hearts about the preservation of Inuit culture is here; the result is an ambience of warmth that overwhelms the cold darkness of Arctic winter.

There is a real cross-section of the community present, unusually so: young children, teachers and nurses from “the South,” hunters and their wives, government workers, equal numbers of Inuit and *qallunaat* (non-Inuit), and a remarkable number of Inuit elders, those who care more deeply than anyone about the evening’s

central theme. The book in the spotlight is an example of one way in which their knowledge and their stories – for so many generations passed on exclusively through the oral tradition – can materially survive into a future dominated by television and computers. These elders have watched with some alarm as their grandchildren eschew the old ways to become functioning participants in the 21st century.

It is somewhat disconcerting for an old man like Analok, born in 1918, who lived the first half of his life “out on the land” before the town of Cambridge Bay existed. He knew firsthand what life dependent on the seal-hunt was like, in a camp consisting of a tiny cluster of iglus far out on the wind-swept sea ice, where each day’s food had to be caught by waiting patiently over a seal’s breathing hole. As much as he wants the young people to be “educated,” in the *qallunaat* sense of the word, he also prays that they will not forget the traditions from which they come. In fact, that is exactly

how the evening’s proceedings get underway, with just such a prayer in Inuinnaqtun led by Analok. Confounded by events of the modern world perhaps, but ever steady in his resolve to help lead his people forward as best he can.

This evening’s event is a book launch, probably the first ever held in Nunavut to recognize a book newly released by a major Canadian publisher for international distribution. And not just a book *about* Inuit but a work based entirely on the traditional perspective of Inuit – that is what sets it apart and that is why so many elders are gathered in celebration. Peter Irniq, Nunavut’s Commissioner, the Queen’s representative, stands up to address the crowd, alternating between languages, Inuktitut and English. He speaks eloquently. He has come to Cambridge Bay for this event, he says, because nothing is more important to him than the preservation of Inuit culture and language, which purposes this book serves. “Everyone in Nunavut should be proud,”

he says, and by that he means the book is the product of people all across Nunavut, so many of whom contributed to its creation. Tonight, it is coming home.

It is a contentious matter, the use of “traditional knowledge.” I am not an Inuk. Yet in this book I undertook to write from the Inuit perspective, using information offered to me by Inuit. I constructed a portrait, sometimes in my own words, sometimes using their words directly (duly credited) as part of the narrative flow. There is no legal issue of copyright involved. If anything, there may be a moral question, although I maintain that question is entirely addressed by the fact that everyone whose words or information appear gave their permission, with a full understanding of the ways it would be used. No one could rightfully suggest the informants were not exercising control – individually and independently, as they should – over the disposition of their own contributions. (It would be inappropriate for any individual, or government body, or non-government organization to assume the role of protector, and take the decision out of the hands of the individual – *that* would be patronizing and insulting.) Nonetheless, as I have known during four years of work on the project, there are those who will be critics simply *because* the book is based on TK. “He steals from the elders,” said one hyperbolically, absurdly, notably a *qallunaaq*, as all detractors in my experience

have been. That there are those who can be justly accused of misappropriating the Native voice, I do not deny. (Among them, paradoxically, are those who deign to speak on behalf of informants, under the guise of

“protecting” their rights.) However, to suggest that *any* use – even with the informants’ explicit approval and support – of indigenous knowledge by a non-Native writer is improper, is patently counter-productive.

The Elders evidently agree; their presence this evening speaks volumes. They know their heartfelt wishes are being served, and they express the sentiment clearly to anyone who will listen. This is a generation which sees itself as the stewards of their ancestors' knowledge, passed down through previous generations to them, a process at risk of stopping there. In my experience, they react with unbridled enthusiasm anytime they are offered (by someone they trust) the opportunity to record that knowledge and their stories. So much the better, they often say appreciatively, if the material can be published or disseminated in some form, the more widely the better. The important thing, of course, to them and to me, is that it must also remain accessible in Nunavut, available to as many Nunavummiut as possible, and nothing serves that end better than a book.




© MAX FRIESEN

Writer David Pelly with elders Frank Analok (left) and Macki Kaosoni (right), during a summer "traditional knowledge" camp near Cambridge Bay.

Speeches over, the crowd mingles, enjoys northern treats of tea and bannock and frozen Arctic char, and begins to examine their new book. Analok, seated in a soft easy-chair, fairly beams as he signs copy after copy of the book in which he is uniquely featured. Writing, the physical act, is not easy for him. He is now old and arthritic. His names are essentially the only

words he ever writes and those only rarely. Tonight he does that dozens of times, with painful difficulty that he dismisses as irrelevant, and clearly enjoys the celebration that underlies the act.

Later, as Analok and others file out of the building into a beautiful Arctic night, as homeward footsteps squeak on hard-packed snow, the community shares a warm sentiment of success, a bit more secure in the knowledge that some of the old stories and knowledge, and indeed the Elders' very words, will be preserved forever in Nunavut, and read by others around the world. Overhead, the northern lights dance across the southern sky in ethereal sheets of white and green. "Our ancestors are happy," says one wise Inuk, looking up, smiling still. 

David F. Pelly

Regular contributor David Pelly has been working with Elders across Nunavut, to record their stories and knowledge, for 20 years. His recent book, Sacred Hunt, was published by Douglas & McIntyre/Greystone.

