

Nunatsinniinnikuuit?

by Moki Kokoris

Inuit tamarmik inunngorput nammineersinnaassuseqarlutik assigiim-millu ataqqinassuseqarlutillu pisin-naatitaaffeqarlutik. Silaqassusermik tar-nillu nalunngissusianik pilersugaapput, imminnullu iliorfigeqatigiittariaqaraluarput qatanngutiigtut peqatigiinnerup anersaavani.

Not that it should be expected that many people would need to phonetically translate formal texts from Kalaallisut to English, but to satisfy the reader's curiosity, the above paragraph is Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, specifically: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood." Simple, right?

And while we are on the subject of translation, the title of this article means: "Have you been to Greenland before?"—implicitly revealing the next destination in our series about indigenous cultures of the Far North.

Although it is technically only the most prominent dialect, Kalaallisut is nevertheless referred to as the official language of Greenland. The other two regional varieties which feature notably are Inuktun (sometimes called Avanersuaq), the northern dialect spoken in Qaanaaq (Thule), and Tunumiit oraa-

siat, the dialect of Ammassalik in eastern Greenland. As are all Inuit languages, Kalaallisut is polysynthetic, which means that words are formed with a root, one or more prefixes, and a suffix. A single Greenlandic word can thus be very long and can mean what would correspond to a complete sentence in other languages. Considering the simplicity of this lexicon and its spelling, it is easy to understand why the country has a 100% literacy rate....

Like most modern Inuit, the people living in Greenland today are descendents of the proto-Inuit, the Thule culture, which developed in coastal Alaska around 1000AD and expanded eastward through Canada and beyond. This migration reached Greenland by the 13th century, mixing with and eventually replacing the earlier Dorset culture that inhabited the region, and there is evidence that in their journeys, these peoples had contact with the Vikings. The links between the Thule and the Inuit are biological, cultural, and linguistic (many of the more pure Inuit are born with a distinctive blue birthmark at the base of their spines). Today, many Greenlanders refer to



Photo: Public domain

Inuit mother with children, 1900.

themselves as "Kalaallit", and are a significant faction of the indigenous Arctic Inuit population: Inuit meaning "human being." They constitute 85% of Greenland's population, while the remaining inhabitants are primarily Danes.

Before the 1940s, the Kalaallit had minimal contact with Europeans. Although Europeans did pass through on their way to hunt whales or trade furs, very few of them had any interest in settling down on the frozen lands of the Arctic. With little to influence them, the Kalaallit had the region to themselves. They moved between summer and winter camps, following the animals they needed to hunt for subsistence. In winter, they lived in igloos, and in summer, they built tents made of animal hides and bones.

Kallallit beliefs, based heavily on shamanism and animist principles, were



U.S. Air Force photo by Col. Lee Vacker Cox

The village of Qaanaaq, located approximately 65 miles north of the base. Qaanaaq is home to about 600 people. This photo was taken in late summer 2007 after the ice on the surrounding water had melted.



closely tied to a system of rituals integrated into the daily life of the people. According to a common Inuit proverb, “The great peril of our existence lies in the fact that our diet consists entirely of souls.” Inspired by myths of their harsh environment, the Inuit believed that all things, including animals, have souls like those of humans, and that any hunt that failed to show appropriate respect and customary supplication would only give the liberated spirits cause to avenge themselves.

Fierce though they have always been, the Inuit generally lived with fearful concern for the uncontrollable, believing that to offend a spirit was to risk its interference with an already marginal existence, and they took great efforts to work in harmony with these supernatural powers who provided the necessities of daily survival.

The angakkuq, or shaman, was more healer and psychotherapist than leader, and tended wounds, offered advice, and even invoked the spirits to assist people in their lives. His or her role was to see, interpret and exhort the subtle and unseen. Angakkuqs were not trained; they were held to be born with the ability and recognized by the community as they approached adulthood.

It was commonly held that the cause of sickness was soul theft, in which someone, perhaps an enemy shaman or a spirit, had stolen the soul of the sick person. The angakkuq was called upon to retrieve the stolen soul. The unwell person could remain alive because people were believed to have multiple souls; therefore, stealing one of the souls brought forth illness or a moribund state rather than immediate death. Interestingly, the Ammassalik Inuit of eastern Greenland have a variant in which they believe that individual body joints have their own small

souls, the loss of which would cause localized pain. (*Interesting concept with which to perhaps approach the American Arthritis Foundation?*)

Whenever game became scarce, the angakkuq would embark on a soul journey, and travel to speak with a mythological being, usually Sedna, the old Sea Woman and central deity, who protected the souls of sea creatures. If the shaman was able to please her, she released the animal souls, thus ending the scarcity of game.

Another task of the angakkuq was to aid fertility, and in this case, the shaman provided assistance not to the woman but to the soul of the unborn child, thereby allowing its future mother to become pregnant.

The long and seemingly endless Arctic nights inspired many tales, myths and legends, but also prompted the creation of simple games, one of them a string game which we know today as the Cat’s Cradle, or in the Kalaallisut language, ajurraarurit. Using reindeer sinew, this was the Inuit method of illustrating their storytelling. Similar games were known to be played by other indigenous cultures, but from written descriptions, the most difficult and complex figures are attributed to the Inuit. Anyone with nimble fingers and infinite patience and tenacity who is interested in attempting some of these designs should visit the “Arctic String Figure Project” at <http://www.isfa.org/arctic.htm>, which has an extensive collection of them: .

It is the polar night that the Thule Inuit culture holds most dear. “Taaq!” It is dark. This period, which lasts for three months on Thule territory, is far from the death shroud we might imagine. The Inuit compare it to a mother’s warm embrace. The Inuit love the darkness. They look forward to it, and it is in this season that their laughter is most often heard. They go visiting, sit together, and they feel united, stronger and more resolute in their confrontation with the pitiless, austere environment. It is in their oqaaluktuara, storytelling, that they connect with the expan-

sive universe, which they poetically interpret as a cathedral whose roof was lost to infinity.

Like many before them, they turn their eyes to the heavens, understanding that the terrestrial universe and its dark sky can be read as a sacred text. They know the constellations, the planets, the moon, and the aurora borealis, and they read and decipher the messages within. When in danger, the stars are viewed as friends who become their guides. This is all much less lifestyle than it is philosophy. As lyrically recounted in an oqaaluktuara by an Inuit to Knud Rasmussen in 1923, “It is amid such darkness that we know the peace of the elemental, structuring forces of the earth, the shudder of the ice, the hum of stones, the intimate interlocking architecture of equilibrium. Listening, we hear a sound of breathing – and what we hear is the force of the earth, the living energy of the cosmos.”

And they, the Inuit of the Far North, have been called barbarians and savages by us, the ostensibly more civilized? Gives us pause to rethink, does it not?

The above contemplative moral aside, we should all feel fortunate that none of us will ever need to participate in a Kalaallisut spelling bee! Ajunngilaq! □



Photo: Alkaly

“No entry for regular vehicles,” a sign in Kalaallisut posted under the authority of Greenland Home Rule, highlands of Isunngua, Greenland.

Kalaallisut word construction:

tusaatsiarunnannngittualuujunga
I can't hear very well.

This long word is composed of a root word **tusaa-** - to hear - followed by five suffixes:

- tsiaq- well
- junnaq- be able to
- nngit- not
- tualuu- very much
- junga 1st person singular present indicative non-specific