

Taaq: The Polar Night and Its Inspirations

"Real beauty is so deep you have to move into darkness to understand it."

~Barry Lopez



Sometimes described as the longest night, the term "polar night" refers to the period of darkness that lasts longer than 24 hours as occurs seasonally inside the Earth's polar circles (latitude 66°33' N or S). Though the North and South Poles each receive six months of continuous night and six of continuous day depending on the time of year, the regions near the inner border of the Arctic and Antarctic Circles experience prolonged periods of twilight. The length of time that the sun never rises above the horizon varies on location, lasting from 20 hours at the Circles to 179-186 days at the Poles.

In Greenland, it is the polar night that the Inuit hold most dear. "*Taaq*" in the Kalaallisut language means "it is dark." Nearly four months long in the Thule region (known as Qaanaaq today), this *taaqaq* period is far from the somber burial

shroud we might imagine. In fact, the Inuit compare it to a mother's warm embrace. Not only do they treasure the darkness, the polar night is the season in which their laughter can most often be heard. It is the time for visiting, and by virtue of these gatherings, their community bonds are reinforced, helping them feel secure and more resolute in their encounters with the austere environment. But it is through their *oqaaluktuara* – storytelling – that the Inuit most strongly connect with the expansive 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 is their sacred ancient text. The Inuit read the constellations and the planets, they contemplate the moon and the aurora borealis, and they 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 Inuk 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."

The long and seemingly endless Arctic nights inspired many tales, myths and legends, and also prompted the creation of simple amusements and pastime activities, one of them the string game known today as the Cat's Cradle, or *ajurraarurit*. Using reindeer sinew, the Inuit also used these string figures to illustrate their storytelling.

It was in 1888, that anthropologist Franz Boas first described how to make an Inuit string figure. 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, one of which even represents the extinct woolly mammoth. Anyone with nimble fingers (and a good dose of patience) who may wish to attempt some of these designs is invited to visit the "[Arctic String Figures](#)" page.

With social challenges facing most Arctic communities in modern times, many of these traditions are being forgotten and some even lost, but their legacy nevertheless carries on as persevering reminders of an existence in which natural order and sustainable practices were a way of life and man respected this balance. The most important lesson we can learn from all indigenous peoples is that human beings are not distinct from nature, but are a part of it.