Note on Education System and Erosion of Orality: an Eastern Arctic Example

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This paper illustrates some ways in which the traditional, or customary, orality of Inuit is being undermined and fragmented by the culturally dissonant practices of the contemporary school system. My remarks refer to Inuit who have settled in Arctic Bay (Ikpiarjuk), at the north-west end of Baffin Island in Nunavut. (People from the Kitikmeot (Qitirmiut) region have sometimes referred to this community as Tununirusiq). The community lies at the north end of a pocket-shaped bay (*ikpiarjuk*, "pocket" in inuktitut*)* that extends north from Adams Sound, one of the smaller inlets that flows east off Admiralty Inlet. These Inuit belong to the group Iglulingmiut which comprises the Inuit who live in the region extending from Igloolik to the southwest through Pond Inlet (Mittimatalik) to the east. They have been introduced to mainstream culture through the English language.

The concept "orality" as used here extends beyond audible, verbal exchanges to include a range of communicative acts and symbols. Thus I consider orality as spoken language within the context of, or as one aspect of, a full spectrum of associated orality practices. This discussion focuses on the customary orality practices of Inuit.

From my perspective, the language practices of a given culture are embedded in the social relations that emanate from that culture's world view. Two essential dimensions of those social relations are social order and knowledge production. Given this viewpoint, I propose that the equivalent dynamics of social order and knowledge production in the context of school have had a culturally damaging effect on Inuit culture.

Let me distinguish here between culture and society: people who claim a common culture are bound together by how they perceive the world to be – that is, their shared world view. As part of this world view, the culture group members also share a common ethos, or moral code, which tells them the acceptable way to live in the world. We can

think of society as comprising the social relationships and roles that people assume in order to maintain social order and productivity. It is here, in their social relations and forms of social organization, that cultures differ from one another.

We can differentiate among types of societies by classifying them according to the complexity of their social organization – greater complexity implying a large scale society, and less complexity implying a small scale society. To illustrate, traditional Inuit society can be considered small in scale. Here social order has been maintained through the face-to-face interaction embedded in the kinship system. In contrast, contemporary westernized societies – France or Canada for example – are large scale societies. In these large scale complex societies a series of separate and discrete institutional systems structure and regulate social interaction. Schooling, in its westernized form, is one of those social institutions. Let me point out that school is a societal rather than a cultural institution, because it exists in all westernized societies.

The members of a cultural group can be considered to embody culture as they interact in the events that represent their world view. In so doing, people become cultural symbols for one another. These could be the members of a kin group for Inuit, or, in a westernized culture, the administrators and teachers in the school system. However, the symbols of one cultural group – whether the symbols are people, acts or events – are transparent to cultural outsiders. Newcomers who are unfamiliar with a given group's world view, usually fail to recognize the existence, let alone the significance, of its symbols.

Returning to my point that language practices are embedded in a cultural group's social relations, we can begin to understand how these practices give life to culturally relevant social relationships and social spaces. As an example, consider the difference between the French *vous* and *tu*. The former usage implies a more formal interpersonal social space between two speakers, while the latter, *tu*, implies a more intimate one.

The Communicative Properties of Inuktitut

As most of you know, inuktitut, the term used to specify the language of Inuit, literally means "in the manner of an Inuk". It is a language of concrete specifity. Users of inuktitut have the capacity to convey precise understandings and interpretations of relationships and events, and can situate them in what otherwise would appear to be undifferentiated space.

Because of the language's extensive resources, Inuit are able to locate events in time and place linguistically in a variety of ways. One of these ways is through the use of demonstratives or deictic shifters. Remarks are introduced with words like *taima* or *maanna* meaning "at this time" or *taakkua*, "these ones here". Deictics can specify both action and location in a single word, such as "high above moving" or "down below remaining still".

Verb endings in inuktitut indicate who is being spoken to or about by whom. Noun endings indicate whether one is in, with, approaching, of, or going from an object or place. We can think of the language, then, as intricately relational. Because of *inuktitut's* capacity for exactitude, those who use it learn to be keenly attentive and observant. Because of their language's rich resources, Inuit can inventively articulate an accurate and immediate re-presentation of their experience as they locate themselves within the world, enlarge their knowledge of it, and convey their knowledge to others.

Moreover, due to the qualities inherent in their language, Inuit customarily give precise and exact accounts of their experiences. Furthermore, Inuit seldom presume to speak for one another. If an inuk does provide a second-hand account, she or he will identify the original speaker and the circumstances under which the original information was given.

Inuktitut and Social Order

Inuit kinship terminology offers another example of the language's creative capacity to summon and differentiate specific relationships.

Those who are familiar with inuit kinship practices know that all the interaction among kin is premised on dyadic relationships – that is a relationship between two people. These extend from immediate family through a full range of aunts, uncles, cousins, parents' cousins, and so on. In each unique instance of relationship between kin, the two participants involved refer to one another by the appropriate kin terms. But the most important aspect of these terms is the reciprocal behavioural roles built into them. Thus the terms that Inuit use to refer to their respective kin are, in fact, behavioural injunctions. These behaviours include respect, obedience, and cooperation.

I have observed some mothers in Arctic Bay (Ikpiarjuk) teaching very young children to recite the terms designating each family member in relation to themselves. In this way children begin to internalize the behavioural rules for interacting with their kin. Ideally, a group of kin can keep their social order intact through honouring their obligations towards one another.

Traditionally, Inuit addressed one another with kin terms; seldom did they use personal names. However they did and still do use personal names to enlarge their sphere of kin connections. Here is an illustration of one aspect of naming practice.

Customarily, newborn children are given the names of one or more deceased relatives or respected elders. Thereafter the kin of the previous name user may opt to "substitute" the new child into the respective dyadic relationships each of them had with the deceased. The new name user is then expected to honour the responsibilities towards kin that the deceased upheld.

According to my experience, Inuit don't address one another by name in the fashion

of southerners or Qallunaat. Nor do they call out directions to one another. This is no doubt because people who are implicated in a system of kin relationships neither need nor like to be verbally directed by others; they know, or should know, what their obligations are.

School and Social Order

When the students in Arctic Bay (Ikpiarjuk) enter school, they are welcomed by the principal or a senior staff member who stands in the front hall and greets each one by name. The majority of those names are qallunaat, if not Christian, names, although quite a few students are known in school by inuit names. However the effect of using names in this way takes children out of the sphere of kin into the sphere of school with its culturally unfamiliar world view. What's more, the principal's greeting reinforces the individualizing and fixed identity that each young child assumes as a school student. These identities are to the advantage of school as they provide a means of regulating the students. They also provide a means of associating a student with one set of parents, thereby reinforcing the nuclear family as opposed to the extended kin family.

School and Knowledge

My elaboration on Inuktitut illustrated some practices that accompany the language. In the same way, language use in school has its own set of practices. Some conflicts between the two sets of language practices were made clear to me through the challenges an inuk teacher-in-training confronted.

This person was accustomed to the practices of orality according to which people speak out of their own experience, and, at the same time, respect the autonomous experiences of others. Now she was being asked to adopt the practices of literacy both for herself and in her teaching. These practices include accepting the validity and authority of generalized knowledge codified in books.

When the trainee was asked by her instructor to teach a class about the geography of a part of Canada unknown to her, she refused on the grounds she didn't "know" it. This despite the fact she was reading about it and "understood" it. But as she hadn't experienced it first hand, she considered she had no right to tell others about it. For her, knowledge should be immediate in the person who is providing the account.

Her reluctance in the situation brings to mind the words of the elder Donald Suluk: "The point is that some inuit – like me – really tell the truth when they give advice, because they have experienced these things" (*Inuktitut* 1987, vol. 65: 94.).

Conclusion

The foregoing examples illustrate two significant ways in which the school system is eroding the orality practices of Inuit. First, the social control that school exerts through individualizing young Inuit undermines their kinship links. Secondly, the knowledge practices of school are embedded in the culture of literacy rather than orality.

Oral practices have played a central role in maintaining Inuit culture. The language itself and the way in which it is used is dynamic and organic in nature. It has been constantly recreated and reshaped by living speakers. But the language is also vulnerable. When Inuit stop practicing Inuktitut it quickly begins to lose its potency.

Moreover, as young Inuit have fewer opportunities to communicate with their kin in culturally resonant contexts, they withdraw from speaking in traditional ways, and inevitably disengage from some of the relationships that contextualize traditional orality practices. Thus the relationships themselves slacken, and some fall into disuse.

I have tried to illustrate how the social implications of school's language practices are eroding inuit orality. However, I hasten to add that cultures are always experiencing change – not only is this inevitable, it is also healthy. It also goes without saying that young Inuit should learn literacy skills and new knowledge in school. But as they do this, they are not learning "in the manner of an Inuk". They are learning in the manner of the Qallunaat.

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