

Life Stories of Inuit Leaders: Inuit Voices in the Making of Nunavut

A productive partnership between Laval University's CIÉRA
(Interuniversity Centre for Aboriginal Research) and Nunavut Arctic College

Thierry Rodon

Carleton University (Ottawa, Canada)
Université Laval (Québec, Canada)
thierry_rodon@carleton.ca

Louis McComber

Nunavut Arctic College
l.mccomber@sympatico.ca

The workshop *Inuit Voices in the Making of Nunavut* was presented at the 15th Inuit Studies Conference in Paris by Susan Sammons, director of the Language and Culture Program at the Nunavut Arctic College, Louis McComber, adjunct instructor at Nunavut Arctic College, Letia Qiatsuq, Katauga Saila, Akumalik Tikivik, then students in the Language and Culture Program of Nunavut Arctic College, Thierry Rodon, adjunct professor at Laval University and Carleton University, and Pauloosie Akeeagok, then a student at Nunavut Sivuniksavut.



Peter Ittinuar, Paul Quassa



James Arvaluk, John Amagoalik

Ottawa, spring 2009, on the day of their books launch.

Introduction

Creating the opportunity for an individual to record his or her life story is akin to obtaining a sample of the social experience of a given time and place. In the Nunavut Arctic College collection *Life stories of Inuit Leaders*, five Inuit political figures recount personal change and political transformation in Canada's North since World War II; their subjective accounts are a view into the spirit of an era.

The five individuals selected to narrate their life stories were all deeply involved in the process of state building that affected Arctic Canada. They illustrate the transition from face to face relations in small seasonal camps to a state-structured way of life in much larger, sedentary communities. These Inuit leaders were compelled to leave their family outpost camps at an early age to be integrated into southern residential schools and/or Tuberculosis sanatoriums where they would rapidly embrace a different lifestyle. Their narratives describe a profound departure from a society primarily organized around kinship ties toward one regulated by government and its main institutions.

Abe Okpik, John Amagoalik, Paul Quassa, Peter Ittinuar and James Arvaluk have different backgrounds, experiences and storytelling style, but they all observe how the arrival of government services in northern Canada transformed the way of life of Inuit people and, to some extent, how the Inuit people influenced the development of northern governance. Indeed, beyond the individual story, it is interesting to consider this collection

in its entirety as an analysis of the contribution of Nunavut Inuit to the development of government structures in the North.

Educational Material

In the mid-1990s when the Abe Okpik interviews were conducted, there was a real need in Nunavut for educational material written in Inuktitut that would express the Inuit view of reality. Even today in the Canadian North, most educational material is imported from southern Canada, and there are all too few books on library and school shelves that can remind students of their own language, traditions and history.

Over the last fifteen years the Language and Culture Program at Nunavut Arctic College, directed by Dr. Susan Sammons, in partnership with Laval University's CIÉRA, has produced a corpus of books to try to fill this gap. This co-operative effort has been sustained by substantial research grants from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. Based on interviews with Inuit elders, these books comprise various collections:

1. [Interviewing Inuit Elders](#)
2. [Inuit Perspectives on the 20th Century](#)
3. [Memory and History in Nunavut](#)
4. [Life Stories of Northern Leaders](#)

Life Stories of Northern Leaders

The idea to collect and publish the life stories of notable northern leaders was inspired in the mid-1990s by the late Abraham Okpik's desire to write a book about his life. His ambition to put his memories into writing was very clear; he had read and admired Charlie Brower's *Fifty Years Below Zero* and nurtured for a number of years his wish to record his own story.

The biography project began officially in 1995 when, as an adjunct instructor, Louis McComber invited Abe Okpik to be a guest lecturer in a northern history class in Nunavut Arctic College's Language and Culture Program. It was fascinating to witness Abe's impeccable memory and talent as a storyteller in this context. Consequently, we invited him to spend 15 hours in a one-on-one interview-based dialogue which would take place over a number of months, and we recorded many personal and political anecdotes on

tape. These transcripts would eventually become the book *We Call it Survival*.

Abe Okpik was a living encyclopaedia of the North and so was an ideal candidate to illustrate the recent transitions in northern Canadian history. He had a broad understanding of northern issues and a remarkable capacity to reflect on them. He was an indigenous adviser for northern administrators (first on the Eskimo Affairs Committee, then later as an appointee to the Northwest Territories Council and as a founding member of the Indian and Eskimo Brotherhood) and had stories to tell about renowned non-Inuit Canadian Arctic characters, many of whom he knew personally, such as Bishop Stringer, Captain Pedersen, Henry Larsen, Stu Hodgson, and Justice Berger. He was brother-in-law of the late Alex Stefansson, son of the early anthropologist Vilhjalmur Stefansson and his main Inuk informant, Fannie Pannigabluk.

Although he had spent a few years at All Saints Residential School in Aklavik and was perfectly able to read, write and express his thoughts in public, he was nevertheless the product of a childhood spent on the land and at sea, as his family moved from trapping to hunting grounds. While he grew up listening to radio, he also experienced the fear-inspiring stories of elders sharing the family camp and heard the sound of the traditional drum in the *illu*. Even though he became a federal civil servant, he hunted and trapped most of his adult life, and this lifestyle is the foundation of Abe's approach to storytelling.

With John Amagoalik's life story, *Changing the Face of Canada*, the reader opens a new chapter of the re-construction of northern society. The anecdotal approach to storytelling makes room for a more functional structure of narrative. Where Abe Okpik uses tangents and circular discourse, John and his peers are more oriented toward political argumentation. They have defended Inuit claims on different regional and national stages. They know how to hold their ground and rally supporters to their cause.

Some twenty years younger than Abe, John's experience of the political process is coloured by new factors. John's generation was much more influenced by English southern education methods than Abe's likely was, as by the time John reached school age, the federal government had developed a school system in the North. Indeed, John Amagoalik, Paul Quassa, Peter Ittinuar and James Arvaluk, the "new" generation of Inuit politicians, completed secondary education and have spent most of their adult life surrounded by journalists, policy analysts, and lawyers; they are manifestly politicians advocating a cause.

John Amagoalik's Changing the Face of Canada is almost a political pamphlet. It is a demonstration of the necessity to transform the condition of the Inuit from wards of the state to full-fledged Canadian citizens on equal footing with the rest of Canada. John

describes his family's relocation from northern Quebec to Resolute Bay in 1953 and the sense of dislocation caused to his family group. He argues that the Government of Canada still owes an apology to the relocated Inuit. His experience of the colonial attitudes of the northern administration of the past has fuelled his life commitment to obtain some form of self-government for his people. His ambition as president of Inuit Tapirisat of Canada (now Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami) or later as the chairman of the Nunavut Implementation Commission has always been to include Inuit in the constitutional and political makeup of Canada.

In *We Need to Know Who We Are*, we see that Paul Quassa also went to high school and was involved with national Inuit organizations. As chief negotiator of Tungavik Federation of Nunavut, Paul became familiar with the Canadian legal context of aboriginal rights and his life is a constant voyage between the sophisticated process of law-making and Inuit community life. Paul was also always curious about spirituality and his ancestral heritage. Most likely because of his long stay at the Chesterfield Inlet Joseph Elzéar Bernier School, where he lived amongst grey nuns and Oblate priests, Paul contemplated priesthood and later wanted to become an Anglican minister. At other points in his life he considered becoming a shaman. The thread linking these different directions has always been the persistent call to be an important Inuit leader.

Paul might be considered a modern communicator: his voice and image have been familiar reference points for Nunavummiut for the last thirty years. When he is not engaged with political life, his main occupation is describing and commenting on the reality of Nunavut. Paul has worked variously for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, The Inuit Broadcasting Corporation, and Igloolik Isuma Productions and his life has been a perpetual movement between Igloolik, Iqaluit, Ottawa and other regional capitals¹.

A distinguishing feature of Paul Quassa's story, and of James Arvaluk's in *That's My Vision*, is that they are still politically active. Paul is the mayor of Igloolik and carries other responsibilities such as the vice-presidency of the board of the Nunavut Association of Municipalities, and the chair of the board of the Nunavut Implementation Training Committee. James is a Member of the Nunavut Legislative Assembly for the Tunnunig riding. Their stance is distinctly that of the politician, likely due to an awareness of the impact their words might have on potential voters or political allies, or due to their experience of the difficulties of implementing their original vision into political decisions in Nunavut.

¹ Jose Kusugak, Peter Irniq, and James Arvaluk have also worked for the CBC, indicating an apparent connection between political presence and an ability to talk and describe the political landscape through the media.

Teach an Eskimo How to Read has a notably different tone, probably because Peter Freuchen Ittinuar is no longer an active politician and has now lived outside Nunavut for several years. He was involved at the very beginning of the Nunavut project and eventually became a senior public servant of the Nunavut government. His narrative is influenced by this outsider/insider position. Adopting a more critical stance than most Nunavut politicians, he offers an analysis of the Nunavut project in the context of the evolution of Inuit society. The title of this book is drawn from a spirited exchange between Pierre Elliot Trudeau and Peter Ittinuar during a field trip across the tundra, although the title is also an adequate summary of Peter's life.

Peter Ittinuar was born in 1950 in Chesterfield Inlet, on the west coast of Hudson Bay. The grandchild of Peter Freuchen, a Danish explorer in the Rasmussen expedition, he was raised in part by Anaqqaq, a famous shaman, and had a very traditional upbringing like other children in his community. Nevertheless, Peter stood apart because of his love of reading, especially stories about his famous grandfather. Because of his passion for reading, he was selected from amongst his peers to take part in the Eskimo experiment, as it was officially called. Along with two other Inuit children, he was sent off to live with a family in Ottawa in order to see if "Eskimo" children could perform as well as "white" children in the "real" school system. And perform they did! These three years in Ottawa changed his life and made him part of two worlds: that of the Inuit and that of the Qallunaat (non-Inuit).

Peter rose through the Qallunaat world, becoming in 1979 the first Inuk Member of Parliament during the crucial period of the patriation of the Canadian Constitution. He has also kept in touch with the Inuit world. He participated in the Nunavut Constitutional Forum and has been the executive director of the Inuit Cultural Center and Assistant Deputy Minister in the new Nunavut government. These experiences allow him to make astute observations on the social and political development of Inuit society.

The fifth book of this series, James Arvaluk's *That's My Vision*, sheds some light on the involvement of Inuit politicians in the territorial arena. The quest for a territory called Nunavut developed on many stages and the territorial assembly was an important one. From the start of the organization in 1971, James was a member of Inuit Tapirisat of Canada and became its president from 1974 to 1977. After being elected president of the Baffin Inuit Association, now the Qikiqtani Inuit Association, he was elected to the riding of Aivilik (Coral Harbour and Repulse Bay) as a Member of the Legislative Assembly of the Northwest Territories. He was an active member in 1992 for the plebiscite on the division of the Northwest Territories and later became the minister of the NWT Department of Education, Culture and Employment. After the creation of Nunavut in 1999, he also

became Nunavut's minister of Education. As with many other Inuit politicians, James Arvaluk has faced major difficulties in his private life that have forced him to retreat from public life on more than one occasion.

Method

There were many significant challenges for the interviewer in each case. It was an effort to catch up with the subject's knowledge of northern history in terms of names, place names, significant dates and events and there are certainly gaps in the spectrum of references to Inuit knowledge when expressed in English in an interview setting. The greatest challenge, however, was in how to pass from the spoken to the written word without losing the distinctive voice and the orality of Inuit discourse.

The selection of Inuit leaders constituted another problem. Many Inuit were involved in the making of Nunavut and we could only produce five books. In many ways the selection was based on the availability and the willingness of the leaders to participate in the project. This has induced some bias, since we were not able to record the voices of Nunavut women. Two reasons explain this failure: few women were involved in the Nunavut project; and of those, none were available or willing to participate in this book series.

The five books published in the collection were produced in different contexts. *We Call it Survival* and *Changing the Face of Canada* were compiled from a series of interviews conducted in English in a one-on-one format by Louis McComber, who also edited the books. *We Need to Know Who We Are* and *That's My Vision* were edited from interview sessions held during special classes at Nunavut Arctic College's Language and Culture Program in Iqaluit. The sessions were facilitated by Louis and questions were prepared in advance by a group of students made up of Annie Amauyak, Jeannie Arnaqjuaq, Letia Qiatsuk, Katauga Saila, Patrick Sangoya, and Terry Ulluliyarnat. The interviews were conducted primarily in Inuktitut, with some parts in English. Paul Quassa and James Arvaluk both spontaneously switched to English on occasion, sometimes because they felt more comfortable speaking about certain subjects in English, or sometimes in answer to a question from the facilitator who expressed himself in English. Alice Ningeogan did simultaneous interpretation in both directions during all the sessions. Dr. Susan Sammons, director of the Language and Culture Program at the Nunavut Arctic College supervised the class project with Dr. François Trudel of Laval University's department of anthropology. Susan also proofread all the manuscripts in their English version, while Maaki Kakkik (Okpik and Amagoalik), Letia Qiatsuq (Quassa) and Rachel Attituq Qitsualik (Arvaluk and Ittinuar) translated and proofread the Inuktitut versions. *We Need to Know Who We Are* was edited

by Louis McComber, while *That's My Vision* was edited by Noel McDermott.

It is possible that both of these manuscripts may be biased toward areas of interest for the students' age group: community life and leisure, kinship, and the future for youth in Nunavut. That the interviewee was able to speak Inuktitut to an Inuit audience certainly introduced a quality of familiarity and good humour to the interviews, however, the larger audience during the group interviews may have otherwise inhibited discussion about personal or delicate issues.

Peter Freuchen Ittinuar's *Teach an Eskimo How to Read* was produced in yet another context. This book is the result of a series of interviews with Peter conducted in English at Nunavut Sivuniksavut, Ottawa, Canada, in April, 2006. The interviews were conducted by Pauloosie Akeeagok, Thierry Rodon, and Murray Angus, who was present when Peter discussed the Constitutional patriation negotiation. The content is a dialogue between Peter and Pauloosie Akeeagok on the one side and Peter and Murray Angus on the other; although the tone of these conversations is different, they are both very enlightening. Pauloosie is a young Inuit student from Grise Fiord (Aussuituq), and when Peter talks of his astonishing experience of moving from a traditional Inuit environment to Parliament Hill, he is conveying his story to a member of the younger generation. It is very much an inter-generational dialogue where an elder is passing on a part of Inuit history to a young Inuk. Conversely, the interview with Murray, Peter's former political adviser at the time he was an MP, is more like a conversation between old friends reminiscing about key events. The Inuktitut version was translated by Rachel Attituq Qitsualik and the book was edited by Thierry Rodon.

It is also important to note that the three editors of the series come from widely varied academic backgrounds and likely hold equally varied biases regarding northern political issues. Specifically, Louis McComber comes from an anthropology background, Thierry Rodon from political science, and Noel McDermott from education and literature.

Common and Differing Perspectives on Northern Issues

It is interesting to highlight how the narratives of Abe Okpik, John Amagoalik, Paul Quassa, Peter Ittinuar and James Arvaluk bring a dichotomy of perspective to the recent history of the Canadian North: All five leaders identify deeply with their Inuit heritage and are devoted to improving the living conditions of Inuit in a transformed world. Each has personally suffered from government mismanagement of the North through various institutions: the Christian church, residential schools, government-hatched social

experiments, and Tuberculosis sanatoriums in southern Canada. At some point Abe says, “For you it is supernatural, for us it was survival.”

Unlike any non-Inuit scholar writing about the Inuit, Abe Okpik, Peter Ittinuar and Paul Quassa have knowledge, and sometimes first-hand experience, of the shamanism embedded in the traditional culture. For them, it is real and it works. This appreciation of “reality” is usually unwelcome or treated lightly in non-Inuit academic circles where the tendency is toward a positivist slant.

If they all have knowledge of what might be called Canadian internal colonialism, the five men address it very differently. Abe Okpik’s comments are mostly ironic as he comments on the introduction of the numbered tag to identify Inuit individuals, on the European and biblical names given to Inuit when baptized, and on the imposition of the English language upon the Inuit and their children. John Amagoalik is more direct and political. He fought to obtain compensation, apology and political representation for Inuit from the federal government. As a former land claims negotiator, Paul Quassa seems to have a grounded, realistic approach with a capacity to reflect on broader aspects of contemporary issues. Beyond institutions, he is concerned with the changing patterns of Inuit identity. Peter Ittinuar directly addresses Canadian assimilative policies and is openly critical of the current Nunavut administration. James Arvaluk comes across as a man of action who knows how to cut deals behind the scene to make things happen.

Conclusion

As Zeebeedee Nungaq once put forth, a “John Franklin approach” to northern challenges that does not include Inuit is vowed to disaster. The five lives featured in these stories have been shaped by just that approach and by their common objective to have the Inuit included. We see that educational institutions in the Canadian arctic must channel the aspirations and discourse of the population they are serving and that the concerns of Inuit today cannot be restricted to reflections and considerations on ancient pre-contact times. Creating meaning from current social issues by Inuit themselves is an essential component to any real self-government. The effective Inuit leader of today has the task of making sense of the social chaos left by the colonial territorial administration; it is essential to understand within themselves the internalization of the institutional and individual abuses that have influenced their lives. This requires a new set of references for coming generations to deal with the current and future challenges of living in the Canadian North, and we hope that our initiative to publish the collection *Life Stories of Northern Leaders* will be a useful contribution to this process.

To cite this publication:

RODON, Thierry. MCCOMBER, Louis. "Inuit voices in the making of Nunavut." *In* Collignon B. & Therrien M. (eds). 2009. *Orality in the 21st century: Inuit discourse and practices. Proceedings of the 15th Inuit Studies Conference*. Paris: INALCO.

<http://www.inuitorialityconference.com>