

Arctic Indigenous Languages Symposium

Tromso, Norway, October 19 -21, 2008

Protecting Culture and Transferring Traditional Knowledge

The critical role of Indigenous Language

You are listening to KBRW Radio, broadcasting at 680 AM from the top of the world, Barrow Alaska. Let us now sit back and listen to the story hour. Every week day, from 6pm to 7pm, an Inuit story is told in the local Inupiaq language over the radio. This great heritage of story telling, with its myths, rituals and Tribal histories, was passed down through generations of grandparents connecting Inuit today to their ancestral past. Inuit Language was important not only for survival but also to record events of a time immemorial. Language is an important part of Inuit culture to this day.

First, the role of language was significant because it helped people in communities pass darkest days of winter when food was scarce, through storytelling. The oratorical skills of story tellers preserved accounts of historical events. They reveal ancient cultural encounters and connect events of a time past to the modern age. They created a sense of identity and belonging. Their stories imparted values and tools for survival in the ever changing Arctic world as other peoples faded into myth and legend. Story tellers were language experts in their field of specialized knowledge. For example, Pete Sovalik was highly respected for his knowledge of Inuit social conduct and animal behavior. Oral historians like Vincent Nageak would visit distant relatives and share many stories about the dangers of Sila-the weather. His knowledge was paramount to Arctic researchers and local residents alike as he retold tales of survival, past and present

Second, because we share one language, Inuit historical accounts, myths and legends share many similarities from one end of the Arctic to the other. Skilled orators would entertain spell bound audiences including early archeologists and researchers working in the Arctic. In Greenland, Hinrich Johannes Rink published old Inuit stories he had collected in 1866 titled Tales and Traditions of the

Eskimo (1875) that included some early contact stories of the Qavlunaat - the Vikings during their occupation of Greenland around 980 A.D. (Pg 317) .In Alaska, Archeologists like Froehlich Rainey in 1940 relied on local ethnographies to complete his fieldwork of Ipiutak, an ancient city of 3,000 B.C. at Point Hope culminating his work in a book Whale Hunters of Tigara(1947) In Canada, John Macdonald, Director of the Igloolik Research Centre published The Arctic Sky: Inuit Astronomy, Star lore and Legend in 1998, based on numerous interviews of Arctic elders. Speaking in their indigenous languages in each of these instances, Inuit traditional knowledge has been transferred through arctic scientists and researchers. Because Inuit elders see the power of documentation they are anxious if not impatient to transfer traditional knowledge so it does not get lost. By these examples we can see the critical role that Inuit played in transferring traditional knowledge and protecting Inuit culture. It is a strategy that works to this day.

As with other Arctic cultures, Inuit indigenous languages face many challenges today. One especially critical, is preservation of indigenous languages, by passing the torch to the younger generation. To do this one must revise the principles and elements of Nation States regarding education. This is timely as our topic, Protecting Culture and Transferring Traditional Knowledge – the Critical Role of indigenous Language, implies. State powers that apply segregating language policies such as the English Only laws notably in the U.S.A. must not be condoned. Such practices by Arctic governments and organizations threaten the survival of indigenous languages that contribute to the international knowledge base of the Arctic environment. Nation states are encouraged to adopt uniform Arctic educational policies, most notably by applying the fundamental right to education recognized in the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*.

Second, as noted in the ICC Principles and Elements for a comprehensive Arctic Policy: Inuit and Indigenous languages are severely under-represented in Colleges and Universities in circumpolar regions. Colleges and Universities should play a central role in delivering indigenous language studies to northern communities through culturally appropriate education delivery systems.

In par with major language programs such as English, French, or Russian, Arctic Indigenous language

Programs should be established to include development of curriculum for teaching indigenous language and a means of exchanging curriculum materials for all levels of education.

Third, In light of the importance of Arctic education and the need for high quality indigenous language teachers, appropriate incentives to attract indigenous men and women to enter the profession and programs for teacher recruitment would help to reduce costs of turnover among teachers in the circumpolar north. It would also only be appropriate to associate teacher training with a university system in order to gain university recognized teacher certification. It is recommended that the University of the Arctic and its associated members in the Arctic States take serious consideration to a new collaboration with the communities they serve. The local communities would recommend further the economic, social and intellectual benefits to be achieved through collaborative association.

Inuit have adapted ways of protecting culture and transferring traditional knowledge through the scientific and literary communities which taken in its full context, we did not expect a better outcome. Passing traditional heritage languages to the younger generation has become critically difficult as the socio-political and economic shifts transform ancient lands to modern landscapes. I applaud the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues and the Arctic States to recognize and promote indigenous languages and to support their daily use. Your support to raise the prestige of indigenous languages could not have come at a better time and we look forward to the positive outcomes from this symposium.

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