Adaptation & resilience — The Inuvialuit story

Nellie Cournoyea gave this plenary keynote at the 2012 Inuit Studies Conference, National Museum of Natural History in Washington, DC on October 27th, 2012.

I would like to begin by thanking the organizers of the 2012 Inuit Studies Conference for inviting me to give one of the plenary keynote addresses. My presentation today is “Adaptation and Resilience — The Inuvialuit Story”.

In particular, I want to share with you some of my thoughts on how cultural resiliency has helped Inuvialuit to adapt in the past, why our culture is still important today, and what we, as Inuvialuit, must do to ensure that we “preserve our cultural identity and values within a changing Northern society.”

Those of you who are familiar with our land claim, the Inuvialuit Final Agreement, will recognize that this is one of the basic goals that lie at the foundation of the Agreement. I know, as well, by long association with Inuit in other areas, that this goal is shared across the circumpolar regions. The Inuit peoples of the western Canadian Arctic are called Inuvialuit — which means “Real People” in Inuvialuktun. Through the settlement of the land claims, the rights and responsibilities were established for our traditional homeland, which we call the Inuvialuit Settlement Region, and are recognized in constitutional law. The Inuvialuit Final Agreement was the first comprehensive land claim agreement signed north of the 60th parallel, and only the second in Canada at that time.

Inuvialuit history extends back into the far distant past, to a time immemorial, which we call Ingiraami in our language. Legends from that time connect the people to the land and environment. Inuvialuit legends tell us about our origins, and how our ancestors hunted and survived in the past. They also communicate Inuvialuit views of the world, and teach strong cultural values.

As we stated in one of our educational publications called Inuvialuit Pikisuit: The Culture of the Inuvialuit:

We have a high regard for certain characteristics and for certain types of individuals. We value curiosity, resourcefulness, patience, kindness, and ability. We appreciate individuals who are successful at whatever they do, who are responsible, who keep their word, and who are modest. These are attitudes, which have not changed despite changes in all else around us.

The distinctive Inuvialuit culture took shape through… processes of adaptation and change over many generations. The population grew, and by the early 1800s Inuvialuit had become the largest Inuit group in what is now Canada.

The arrival of foreigners two centuries ago severely tested the resiliency of Inuvialuit culture. Sustained contact between Inuvialuit and outsiders — people we call Tan’ngit — began in the mid-1800s, first through the fur trade and soon after with the arrival of commercial whalers in the Beaufort Sea. The commercial whalers had a devastating impact on Inuvialuit, as they brought with them immoral behavior, alcohol, and a complete lack of respect for the people, especially the women. Missionaries, police, government and other agencies that were foreign to the area soon followed.

The newcomers brought new items that in some ways made life easier, but also brought new diseases that took a terrible toll on Inuvialuit. Whole communities were wiped out, social connections were severed and survivors struggled to maintain their traditional values… The inability of the angakuit — ‘shamans’ — to cure those who became sick caused many of the survivors to seek modern remedies. These new diseases came fast and furious, and overcame the ability of traditional healers to learn how to treat the people. As ties to traditional cultures weakened, Inuvialuit began to accept the ways of the Tan’ngit...

The damaging and destructive whaling era was short-lived. By the early 1900s trapping had become a foundation of the Northern economy. With money earned from trapping, Inuvialuit were able to purchase schooners. This made it easier to travel further to places on Banks Island and Victoria Island, where they mixed with the Inuit of those areas, called the Inuinnaqtun. Most Inuvialuit today can trace their ancestry to one or more of three Inuit populations: the original inhabitants of our area who called themselves Sigiit, Alaskan Inupiat and Inuinnaqtun.

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With the arrival of Tan’ngit we also began losing influence over our lands and our lives. Without
knowing it, in 1870 the Inuvialuit homeland became part of the new Dominion of Canada. Although a Council of the Northwest Territories was established in Ottawa, it paid little attention to the far northwestern part of the country. The government was content to let the police and missionaries deal with the Inuvialuit.

It was only when other nations sought to stake claims in the Arctic, and when oil was discovered at Norman Wells, that the government became aware of the potential riches in the Northern region. In 1921, the Department of the Interior sent a government representative, Oswalt Finnie, to meet with Inuvialuit leaders. These leaders included Nuligak and Mangilaluk. Oswalt Finnie attempted to encourage them to join a Treaty that had been imposed a few years earlier on Dene living to the south of us...

Inviting the Government to become more active in our area had many unintended consequences. One consequence is that many of our names were changed. The Government acted on some of Mangilaluk’s and Nuligak’s recommendations and started making family allowance and old age payments to Inuvialuit. However, they found it difficult to keep track of people by their traditional names, which they could not pronounce. Starting in the 1940s the government began to issue Eskimo Identification Numbers to Inuvialuit and Inuit. Each person received a disc with his or her number stamped on it. It wasn’t until the 1970s that people’s names replaced these identification numbers in government records. From that time forward people were required to have first names, usually Christian names, and surnames.

Another major consequence was the introduction of residential schools. The government only gave a Family Allowance to mothers if their children attended school. Some families moved into settlements so that they could be with their children attending day schools. However, many others lived too far away and had to send their children to residential schools.

The traditional way for Inuvialuit children to learn was through observation and participation in daily activities. When missionaries arrived they arbitrarily took children to be educated at the missionary schools. Many were not able to go home for 5 or 6 years.

In 1908 the Government of Canada declared the Mackenzie District to be a Missionary Field, and gave the churches responsibility for educating the children. The Anglican and Roman Catholic churches built and operated residential schools in what is now the Inuvialuit Settlement Region.
In 1946, the Government began to take over responsibility for the education system and established elementary ‘day schools’ in some communities. The churches continued to operate residential schools in Aklavik for students for communities that had no day school, and for those attending high school. The church-run residential schools operated until student residences were built in Inuvik in 1959 with Roman Catholic and Anglican residential facilities.

As it is relevant to the issue of residential schools, I want to mention at this point that in June 2008, Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper issued a full apology for the residential school system on behalf of all Canadians, acknowledging that the policy of assimilation was wrong, has caused great harm, and has no place in our country. Although some former students have spoken positively about their experiences at residential schools, these stories are far overshadowed by the lasting and damaging impact on Aboriginal culture, heritage, and language.

The Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement led to the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Last year, Inuvik hosted the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Northern National Event. Approximately 1,000 former residential school students, government and church leaders, and other participants were in attendance. Expressions of Reconciliation took place each morning with individuals, communities and church groups. More than 50 ceremonies took place, with truth sharing and cultural performances. The goal of the Commission is to acknowledge what happened and educate Canadians on the history of residential schools, as well as build towards healing and reconciliation.

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By the 1960s, it became clear and evident that we could no longer leave our fate entirely in the hands of government. One of the things that triggered action was the interest that oil and gas companies were beginning to show in our lands, and the lack of involvement we had in government decisions about allocating lands for exploration and development. Inuvialuit of all ages and backgrounds — Elders, harvesters, civil servants, broadcasters, and politicians — came together for the Committee for Original Peoples Entitlement in 1970, which we call COPE. Originally we intended to provide a united voice for all Aboriginal people of the NWT, but by 1976 COPE was given a mandate to negotiate a land claim specifically for the Inuvialuit.

Working towards our land claim was truly a ‘grass roots’ process. COPE fieldworkers spoke with every Inuvialuit at the community level, and the negotiators brought the demands of the Inuvialuit to the Federal Government. After many years of hard work and many compromises, a significant milestone was reached when COPE and the Government of Canada signed an Agreement-in-Principle in 1978. Much work still lay ahead, and it wasn’t until six years later, on June 5, 1984, that the Inuvialuit Final Agreement was signed. June 5th is a day that we commemorate to this day as Inuvialuit Day, and it is the cause of great celebration in our communities.

With the IFA in place, COPE’s work was completed and the organization was dissolved, making way for the Inuvialuit Regional Corporation to implement the new agreement.

We could spend many hours telling you about our institution, the Inuvialuit Regional Corporation — or IRC as we call it — and what we are doing today, but that will have to wait for another day.

I would like to take a few moments to tell you something about my path to this great organization, and my growing conviction about the importance of culture, heritage, and true wealth creation.

I was born on a trapline near the village of Aklavik. Like many Inuvialuit, some of my ancestors were from places far away. My father was from Norway, and my mother and my ancestors on her side of the family were all Inuit from the North.

I have been fortunate to have had the opportunity to work in the broadcasting field, first as a volunteer in Aklavik, and then with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation for nine years as an announcer and a station manager. I then became a land claim fieldworker for Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, the national Inuit organization in Canada, and was a founding member and later an administrator of COPE.

Among my proudest achievements while working with CBC and COPE was getting people to agree to record their knowledge, legends and oral histories that have been passed down from generation to generation. These stories were broadcast over CBC and a private radio station in Tuktoyaktuk. Much of the information was used to substantiate our traditional land use while negotiating the land claim. Many of the Elders who shared their stories during that time are no longer with us, but fortunately the stories we did record have been preserved and are still used in school programs and research projects on an almost daily basis.

While working for COPE, it was clear that we were not getting any support for our land claim from the territorial government. It was felt that by work-
ing inside the system, we would be able to remove some of the misunderstandings that were creating barriers. As a result, it was decided that one of us should try to get into territorial politics.

In 1979 I was elected as the Member of the Legislative Assembly for Nunakput, which included the communities of Sachs Harbour, Tuktoyaktuk, Holman (now called Ulukhaktok) and Paulatuk. It was not a full time position, and it allowed me to continue to devote a good part of my time to the advancement of the Inuvialuit claim. My job was to try to build an understanding and trust of the claim within government.

The Inuvialuit Final Agreement was officially signed in 1984. Hopefully the intervention from within had helped. In 1991, I was chosen to be Premier of the Northwest Territories by my fellow MLAs, becoming the first woman elected to serve as a premier in Canada. I remained in that position until 1995.

In 1996, I was elected Chair and CEO of the Inuvialuit Regional Corporation, a position that I still hold today. IRC celebrated its 25-year anniversary in 2009. We have accomplished much over that time. The future continues to provide us with many opportunities to continue with our successes, but we are also aware of the many challenges we face.

For as long as we can remember through our oral history, Inuvialuit have used songs and dances to recount history, stories, legends, and values, and to celebrate our achievements.

Not long ago, only a few of our Elders practiced the songs and dances of our ancestors. Thanks to the efforts of Elders, youth and many others, most of our communities today have large drum dance groups with many active members. I am especially proud that the Paulatuk Moonlight Drummers and Dancers are part of the Inuit Studies Conference. This drum dance group was started by youth in Paulatuk, and it is largely through their own efforts that they have come to international acclaim.

Our traditional sports are as much an expression of our culture as they are a demonstration of physical skills and abilities. Most of these sports were used in the past to develop and maintain skills needed for hunting and survival, but they also played a role in community bonding.

Inuvialuit speak three dialects known collectively as Inuvialuktun. Unfortunately, Inuvialuktun is classified as an endangered language because it is spoken by fewer than 50% of the population, many of whom are Elders. Together with the Inuvialuit Regional Corporation, the Inuvialuit Cultural Resource Centre has supported several oral history projects. Its mandate includes:

- Develop a language plan for the Inuvialuit Region.
- Develop an Inuvialuktun Language Curriculum and Program.
- Provide Inuvialuktun language teachers with resource materials.
- Preserve and maintain the Inuvialuktun language.

One of our priorities is to develop culturally appropriate learning materials, and ways of educating our students. One of the tools that we have recently developed for teachers to help them create a more balanced and relevant instruction is ‘Taimani,’ a visual guide of Inuvialuit culture and history. In the winter of 2012, Taimani was the first course taught at the high school level for students to learn about Inuvialuit history from ‘Time Immemorial’ to today. We are proud that Myrna Pokiak, an Inuvialuit anthropologist born in Tuktoyaktuk, was instrumental in guiding us through the process of getting relevant materials produced.

In order for us to truly grasp our cultural heritage, and to make it meaningful, each of us needs to establish our own personal connections. As Inuvialuit history is an oral history, it was felt that historical writings reflected primarily the views of those coming in and reflecting on and documenting what
they saw from the outside. However, as time went by, we found many of the journals and historical documents helpful. Although they were not totally compatible with the reality of our experiences, they were nonetheless very useful.

Anthropologists, archaeologists, and institutions from outside who have shared, and still share, our curiosity about our past and who are willing to work with us are an important part of helping us tie together many of the gaps in our history. Given our suspicion that past expeditions had been stealing our artifacts, this changed when institutions offered us quick and ready access to the collections. I also know that it is important that we encourage our youth to become anthropologists, archaeologists, historians, linguists, and traditional knowledge experts...

In the tradition of our Elders, I would like to conclude today with one of our Inuvialuit stories. In the early 1900s, an Inuvialuk, Angusinaaq, told the anthropologist Knud Rasmussen about Ingiriyut, the Smoking Hills along the coast near Paulatuk. According to our legend, the smoke is from the cooking fires of people who went to live in the ground after other people took things from them without their permission. There is a lot more to this traditional story, however, as with all of our legends, there is a lesson to be applied today. In this case the lesson is: if we are to work together we have to do so on the basis of trust and sharing.

Thank you for the opportunity to address you today and I hope I have given you a glimpse into our history and some insight into what has allowed our people not just to survive, but to thrive. There are lessons to be learned from our stories, and I hope we can help our young people become better and stronger in the future because of our experiences of the past. We hope to build understanding among Tan’ngit that we are first Canadians, and Canadians first, and are a vital part of the world’s society.