Ahiarmiut relocations and the search for justice

The life and work of David Serkoak

Karine Duhamel & Warren Bernauer

David Serkoak, now an Elder, was only a child when his family was repeatedly relocated by the Government of Canada throughout the Arctic, in order to clear the land for government operations and to centralize Inuit populations under government control and surveillance. For nearly three decades he has researched the history of his people in collaboration with community Elders, and has worked to educate the public about what happened to the Ahiarmiut as part of his ongoing quest for compensation and an apology from the Government of Canada.

The key to his work is awareness; for David, the more people know about the relocations, the better the chances that he will finally be able to secure justice for his community. Recently, he collaborated with the Canadian Museum for Human Rights (CMHR) to tell the story of the relocations as part of a new exhibition devoted to critically assessing Canada’s human rights record over the last 150 years entitled Rights of Passage. In this exhibition, David shares the story of the Ahiarmiut, calling attention to the importance of place in the construction of identity and the impacts of forced relocations on all facets of his life. At the official opening of the exhibition, David sat down with Northern Public Affairs for an interview about his life and work.

The relocations
Beginning in the early 20th century, colonial institutions planned and carried out several relocations of Inuit communities. Before World War Two, the Hudson’s Bay Company moved Inuit to help expand their operations to new frontiers. After the war, the Canadian government continued this practice and was responsible for numerous relocations. Today, the most famous government relocations are those from Nunavik (Northern Quebec) to the High Arctic Islands in the 1950s. Because of recent government apologies and compensation packages, driven by decades of activism by Inuit, the High Arctic relocations are relatively well-known. However, these were one of many post-war relocations of Inuit, most of which the government has yet to officially address.

The Ahiarmiut are a group of Inuit from the southern Kivalliq region of Nunavut. With a homeland surrounding Ennadai Lake, the Ahiarmiut
are one of several Inuit groups that lived year-round in the interior of the Kivalliq region with an economy and culture focused on caribou hunting. They lived in what David Serkoak describes as the “triangle” in the area between Windy Lake, Ennadai Lake, and Hicks Lake. He recalls fondly early memories of his mother and father living on the land, and of his mother, as a very strong woman, teaching him to hunt. As he describes, “[S]he would go for a few hours a day… to look for rabbits or ptarmigans or something to eat.”

After World War Two, the Canadian Army built a military radio station at Ennadai Lake. Government officials soon became concerned that Inuit would become dependent on the military base for assistance during food shortages. In part, David explains that this was due to their unfamiliarity with the land and with Inuit modes of survival. In his opinion, the radio station did not impact the caribou – rather, the shortages were a normal course of life within the community: “We understand the migration of caribou changes every so often. They may migrate through this way, a bit further out, and because sometimes weather plays a role… We accept that because we know.” Still, radio signal operators reported the population as desperate and starving, paving the way for a relocation that government officials explained was in the best interests of the Ahiarmiut. As a result, the Ahiarmiut were then relocated to Nueltin Lake in 1949.

In David’s recollections, a key feature of subsequent relocations of the Ahiarmiut was the complete lack of consultation and preparation by government officials throughout. During the first relocation, “The Elders told me that three men came from the radio station: a heavy equipment operator, an extra man, and a police man. [The Ahiarmiut] were ordered out of their tents … and the signal was given to bulldoze their stuff back and forth and bury it. And there was another signal to get on a plane. And, away we went to Nueltin Lake.” The group was not provided with tents upon arrival and slept outside. And, as David adds, “There were a few elderly people who did not make it.” According to David, the government moved the group around the Arctic without any understanding of the area, without planning in place and without any resources to assist – “lots of band-aid solutions” which, ultimately, got people killed.

By fall, the group discussed ways to get home, back to Ennadai Lake. They decided to walk there – a journey of nearly three months, in the dead of winter. As David recalls, “Soon as[the] cold winter arrive[d], the lake form[ed]enough to walk across from the island to the mainland. And they said, they have to go back. They have to walk back to Ennadai Lake, which they did. … Then, here they were again, back in their rightful place, Ennadai Lake. That is their comfort zone.” By Christmas, most of the Ahiarmiut had returned to their home.

Undeterred by the group’s return, the government soon began planning a second relocation. In 1958 and without their consent, the Ahiarmiut were airlifted to Henik Lake. The caribou did not migrate through the Henik Lake area that fall as expected, and food rations soon ran out. As winter set in, the Ahiarmiut began to experience famine, and as David describes, “Some people starved to death. And some people died of cold exposure, both young and old.” Starvation had other effects as well: before long, a man suffering from mental health issues, possibly due to malnutrition, murdered another member of the camp. The murdered man’s wife, Kikkik, subsequently stabbed the murderer and fled the camp with her children by foot. On her way to a trading post, Kikkik was forced to leave two of her children behind, wrapped in skins and buried in snow. When Kikkik arrived at the post, she was arrested and charged with murder. Kikkik was ultimately found not guilty in the trial that ensued.

The Ennadai Lake relocations became the source of national controversy in Canada. The trial of Kikkik was reported in the national media, exposing the tragic results of the government’s failed relocations. In addition, the publication of The Desperate People – a book by Farley Mowat which documented the experiences of the Ahiarmiut – further exposed the tragedies to a national audience. The resulting public controversy was a factor in the government’s decision to settle Inuit into centralized communities in the 1960s. Several academic studies, public inquiries, and documentary films have documented the ordeal of the Ahiarmiut.

In the wake of the trial, the surviving Inuit at Henik Lake were airlifted to Eskimo Point (now Arviat) in early 1959. They were subsequently relocated several additional times, to Whale Cove, then to Itivia, and then back to Whale Cove, as the government attempted to reestablish them as coastal marine mammal hunters, which was extremely difficult for people who had previously lived in inland communities. As David describes, “… for our parents … They never experience[d] salt water before, high tide, low tide. Never seen a seal or taste one before. All these are new to them.” In addition, David cited the dialect difference that led the group to lose nearly all of its own dialect and adapt to coastal Inuktut, with devastating consequences for his own language: “And for us, the younger group, we lost almost one hundred percent of our own dialect and adapt[ed] to coastal dialect in Inuktut.”
Interestingly, the relocations also placed the Ahiarmiut in contact with other Inuit, who often considered them as a backwards group. As David recalls, “[B]ecuse we are one of the very last people who were pulled out from [our] traditional setting, moved into these new locations and I think that’s where they’re thinking, well they’re not like us… That’s all we hear. You are no good. You are poor. You are dumb. Many of us almost start to believe that. We are dumb. We are no good.” By 1969, most Ahiarmiut had moved to Arviat for good, largely by their own means.

**Sharing the story**

Since the 1980s, David has worked with Ahiarmiut Elders, academics, and lawyers to research and document the details of how and why the Ahiarmiut were relocated, to educate the public and to advance a claim for compensation and apology from the federal government on behalf the community. He has documented his efforts through co-authored academic articles, presentations in schools and universities, and a book on the subject. He describes his work as a “personal journey” to uncover the truth for his family and other Ahiarmiut, but also stresses the importance of educating Canadians in general about Inuit relocations: “The more public hear, see, the better for me. More, not just a small group should know, but lots of people should know of what happened.” David also hopes to find justice and closure with a legal claim. He is reluctant to discuss the details of the claim but stresses how important it is for the government to address human rights infringements in a timely manner, while survivors are still alive: “All these Elders have passed away now, except for one person.”

In his work, David emphasizes the importance for Indigenous peoples to tell their own stories. As he explains, “There’s tons and tons of books about us, articles about us, and a few video documentaries, done by other people, mostly by archives and stuff, which are fine too. But this way I can get it down first hand. I want to tell the public our version of what exactly happened. It’s our story, it should be told by us.” A key component of this story-telling is also to share impact and to describe the Ahiarmiut’s continuing commitment to gaining justice for relocation experiences, and their ongoing impacts.

Toward this end, David also recently contributed to the Canadian Museum for Human Rights’ newest exhibition, Rights of Passage. The exhibition critically chronicles 150 years of history in Canada and features the stories of individuals and communities in their own words. This is important because national museums have a long and checkered history of exhibiting stories in service of an idealized notion of “nation”—one that often excludes Indigenous Peoples and reduces the presence and importance of First Nations, Metis and Inuit. As such, the inclusion of stories that challenge the foundation of the Canadian state as a whole, such as David’s story, is part of the CMHR’s larger decolonizing methodology that includes community collaboration, the prioritization of Indigenous perspectives and voices, and the sharing of Indigenous rights violations as a shared history that is important for all Canadians.

For David, the central goal of his participation was building awareness for a story of relocation that is not universally well-known and whose impacts continue to be under-estimated. Over the course of nearly two full days, David shared his story with a CMHR curator. Through the eyes of his experience as a child, he described what life was like as soon as the government set up its signal station near the community, and how the presence of outsiders in what had previously been a tightly-contained group changed everything. The personal story of his and of the community’s experience drove the impact of relocations home. David shared several important elements about the ongoing attachment to Ennadai Lake as a site to connect to these ideas. For instance, in discussing a visit organized for community members to return to Ennadai Lake in the 1980s, chronicled by CBC’s The Fifth Estate, he explains: “It was emotional. And one day my mother, my brother … went to our little camp rings, our little fishing place. I was looking to the rocks, and I found a little kayak. It probably was my toy… They reminisced the whole two weeks and did the drum dance as a last goodbye to Ennadai Lake.” For many in that group, it was the very last time they would see their home. A toy kayak is on display as part of the exhibition, lent to the Museum by David Serkoak.

The process of putting together his contribution to Rights of Passage also provided David with the opportunity to discuss his ongoing negotiations with the Government of Canada to gain recognition for his community’s relocation. For most survivors of the relocations, time has already run out. As he recalled, “From my last trip to Arviat this spring, I was talking to the lone Elder, like one of the adults when we first moved. She says she goes to the post office every day to see if there is a cheque from the government. And she also tells me personally… ‘I think the government are waiting for us to die off, so they don’t have to deal with us on this embarrassing situation.’” The Elder in question is the last of those who were adults during the relocations. For David, telling his own story, in his
own way, helped to fulfill a personal goal he has set for himself. He also helped to advance his community’s search for justice in the form of compensation by raising the profile of the story, which was subsequently featured in national newscasts and in many online forums, and which will be preserved in its digital form at the Museum.

**Completing the drum song**

On December 10th, 2017 the Canadian Museum for Human Rights officially opened the Rights of Passage exhibition including David’s account of the relocations of the Ahiarmiut of Ennadai Lake. As part of the opening ceremony and press conference, David and his granddaughter Briana Qahuq Kilabuk performed a drum dance. As drum dances always had, its performance at the CMHR signaled a way of addressing an important event in the community’s history, as well as in its contemporary experience. The drum dance they performed, a testament to memory and to identity, was a way of completing a dance begun, but not completed, years prior; when the Ahiarmiut were interrupted during a drum dance in a tent near Arviat.

As David describes the incident, while his father was drumming and his mother was singing, a police officer disrupted the dance and broke the drum, injuring David’s father. “[My mother] was right there, singing to my father, when the incident happened. The drum went silent and the song was stopped.” This incident was the basis of this new performance for the opening of the exhibition, as David explained to the audience. “When I was asked to perform for this opening, I knew right away that I wanted to use my father’s song, or pihiq, and it will be more special for me because right behind me is a drummer in the making.” David said with a smile, as he pointed to his granddaughter. “It will be a very significant day for my family, especially for me, because the young lady behind me is named after my late mother, Qahuq.”

In an interview after the performance, David explained that Briana is his mother’s abbaq. A part of his mother lives on in his granddaughter because they share a name: “My mother’s songs will become hers, and also her relationship with my brother and my family’s side, she is someone very special. And her brother is named after my late father Mikki – he has a special place on my family’s side. It’s pretty unique because my mother was really into drum dancing just like my father was and here she is, her namesake, my granddaughter, picked up drumming and really got that interest.” Because of this relationship between David’s mother and granddaughter, dancing together to his father’s song was an important way to address and work through the colonial violence his family experienced while they were repeatedly relocated by the federal government.

His mother’s song is now finished, but David’s struggle is not. To date, the Ahiarmiut have not received apology nor any compensation for the series of events that pitted the priorities of the state against the very livelihood of their community. As David explains, “I know the apology will take a long long time. And I also know there might be compensation – someone told me that’s how they make up: apologize and here is your money. End.” For him, though, it is about the future generations: “It’s good for my soul … I just love to teach. I love to drum dance. I love to pass on my knowledge to young people, whether they are Inuit or not.” Now officially retired, David’s tireless work continues. As he argues, “Lots of people should know.”

**Karine Duhamel is the Curator for Indigenous Rights at the CMHR, and holds a PhD in History from the University of Manitoba.**

**Warren Bernauer is a doctoral candidate in Geography at York University.**

**Endnotes**

1 Throughout this paper, “Western” and “southern” are used to position Inuit (i.e. “North/ern”) in distinction to the non-Inuit worldviews. While “Western” is used here to replace the more established concept of “Global North,” “southern” denotes the national scale.

2 Although the Western academic knowledge system includes schools of thought that critique the colonial status quo, the way research is generally conducted and delivered does little, if anything, to challenge the status quo on the ground; the critique itself remains in the privileged academic sphere.

3 Inuit-related research allocations in Budget 2018 and the National Inuit Strategy on Research by the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK) are good signs of research as a tool for self-determination.


8 Laugrand, Oosten, and Serkoak.

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