

A C K N O W L E D G M E N T S

*W*ith much heartfelt gratitude we would like to thank
the Pairijait Tigummivik Society for funding the
publication costs for this series.

Without their contribution this series may not have become a reality.



Nick Newbery



Nick Newbery

THE LANGUAGE AND CULTURE PROGRAM
would like to acknowledge the support we received
from the R. Howard Webster Foundation, for the
Nunavut Arctic College—University of Leiden Exchange Project,
from 1995–1997 which helped lay the foundation for this book.

Preface

This volume is the first part of a series of five books devoted to the study of oral traditions. The research presented in these books was conducted by students of the Inuit Studies program supervised by Susan Sammons of Nunavut Arctic College. Elders were invited to come to the College, where all interviews were conducted in Inuktitut and simultaneously interpreted into English. The English and Inuktitut recordings will be published in separate volumes.

The project was set up to develop the skills of the students in interviewing, transcribing, and writing essays. The students selected topics which were of interest and importance to them, and facilitators were invited to assist the students in their research. The first course gave a general introduction to oral research, and was facilitated by Alexina Kublu (Nunavut Arctic College), Frédéric Laugrand (Laval University) and Jarich Oosten (Leiden University). The second course dealt with traditional health practices and was facilitated by Michèle Therrien (National Institute of Oriental Languages and Civilisations) and Frédéric Laugrand. Two courses on methods of social control were also taught, one facilitated by Wim Rasing (Nijmegen) and the other by Frédéric Laugrand and Jarich Oosten; these results will be published in one volume. A course on child-rearing practices was facilitated by Jean Briggs (Memorial University). Finally, Bernard Saladin d'Anglure (Laval University) facilitated a course on shamanism and traditional beliefs with Stéphane Kolb (Laval University).

All volumes contain an introduction by the facilitator(s), a presentation of the results of the interviews with elders, and a glossary of traditional words. Some volumes also contain essays written by the students about their individual areas of interest in each specific course.

The series on oral traditions is intended to contribute to the preservation of the knowledge of the elders, and the styles and modes of thinking implied in it. The contribution of the interpreters, Maaki Kakkik, Ooleepika Ikkidluak, Nina Manning-Toonoo and Archie Angnakak, was also invaluable.

We would also like to thank Sally Mikijuk for her perseverance and dedication through many trying times in the typing of these manuscripts. The many hours of work that Sally put into this project helped make this publication a reality. We would like to thank Marja Korhonen and Noel McDermott for proofing the English manuscript and Alexina Kublu for proofing the Inuktitut. Thanks are also due to Roberta Roberts at Nortext for her interest and support of this project and help with the publication of this manuscript.

Most of all, we thank the elders and students who made this series possible:

We would like to thank Pauloosie Angmarlik, Saullu Nakasuk, Elisapee Ootoova, Hervé Paniaq, Tipula Attagutsiaq, Alicee and Akeeshoo Joamie, Jayko Pitseolak, Thérèse Ijjangiaq, Emile Immaroitok, Lucassie Nutaraluk, Mariano and Tulimaaq Aupilarjuk, Naki Ekho and Uqsuralik Ottokie for passing down their knowledge to us. We would also like to thank the students, Eena Alivaktuq, Susan Enuaraq, Myna Ishulutak, Nancy Kisa, Bernice Kootoo, Aaju Peter, Jeannie Shaimaiyuk, Julia Shaimaiyuk, Mathieu Boki, Johnny Kopak, Kim Kangok and Vera Arnatsiaq. We believe we learned as much, if not more from them as they did from us.

*“I can be asked what I know.
I state only what I know.”*
Saullu Nakasuk

Interviewing the Elders

Nunavut Arctic College Oral Traditions Project

In November 1996, Arctic College organized a course on Oral Traditions for the students of the Inuit Studies program supervised by Susan Sammons. The aim of the course was to train Inuit students in recording the oral traditions of Inuit elders. Oral traditions reflect changing Inuit perspectives of the world. Their dynamics inform us about the way Inuit integrate past and current changes into their perspectives of the world. In a rapidly changing society, the preservation of the knowledge of the Inuit elders is of great value to the cultural identity of modern Inuit.



Frédéric Laugrand

The students in the first week, seated around the tables.

The oral tradition project started in 1994, developed in the context of cooperation between Nunavut Arctic College and Leiden University in the Netherlands. It had its inception when Jarich Oosten of Leiden University was introduced to Susan Sammons by Michèle Therrien of the National Institute of Oriental Languages and Civilisations, Paris, at the IXth Inuit Studies Conference in Iqaluit. They agreed on a program of cooperation between Nunavut Arctic College and the University of Leiden to stimulate research on Inuit oral traditions. In 1995, Maaki Kakkik, of Nunavut Arctic College, visited Leiden University, where she and Jarich Oosten gave a joint presentation at an Oral Traditions conference. The following year, Alexina Kublu, an instructor in the Inuit Language and Culture program at the College, taught at Leiden University. The next year, Susan Enuaraq, a student in the College’s Inuit Studies program, gave several

lectures at Leiden as well. The contributions of the Inuit teachers were very much appreciated by the Dutch students, who were thus provided with an opportunity to be taught about Inuit culture from an Inuit perspective.



Frédéric Laugrand

*Hervé Paniaq from Iglulik and Elisapee Ootoova from
Mittimatalik playing Ajaraaq.*

The three-week course on Oral Traditions was organized by Susan Sammons. The instructors were Frédéric Laugrand, Alexina Kublu and Jarich Oosten. It would have been ideal if all three instructors had been present all the time, but that was not to be. The first week was taught by Frédéric Laugrand and Alexina Kublu; during the second week, all three instructors were present; and in the third week Alexina Kublu had to leave because of her father's death.

The design of the course

The general aims of the project were to teach the students to:

- consider Inuit perspectives as well as Western views on oral traditions;
- conduct research on selected themes;
- plan and organize their research;
- work in teams;
- collect and record oral traditions;
- acquire practical experience by conducting interviews with elders;
- transcribe the interviews into syllabics and Roman orthography;
- translate the texts from Inuktitut into English;
- write reports of their research.

The research project focused on life stories and themes selected by the students on the basis of their personal interests. The design of the course enabled them to connect their themes directly to the life stories of the elders.



Hervé, Elisapee, Alexina and Frédéric talking.

In planning the Oral Traditions course of 1996, we opted for an approach which gradually introduced the students to basic principles of collecting and recording oral traditions. Four elders were invited by Nunavut Arctic College and interviewed in Inuktitut by students: Elisapee Ootoova from Mittimatalik and Hervé Paniaq from Iglulik came during the second week; and Saullu Nakasuk and Pauloosie Angmarlik from Pangniqtuuq were interviewed in the third week. Ooleepika Ikkidluak provided excellent simultaneous interpretation to enable Frédéric Laugrand and Jarich Oosten to follow the process. The instructors refrained from interfering, and discussed the ways in which the interviews were conducted before and after the sessions, rather than during. In this way, the relevance of various principles of method, discussed prior to the interviews, could be tested immediately by the students in the interviews. The setting which was chosen guaranteed that elders as well as students could express themselves in Inuktitut in an environment in which they felt at ease. Thus, the course was oriented to practice, and no more theory or methodology was introduced than was strictly necessary.

Eight students participated in the course. Four teams were set up to conduct the interviews: Aaju Peter and Jeannie Shaimaiyuk interviewed Elisapee Ootoova; Susan Enuaraq and Julia Shaimaiyuk interviewed Hervé Paniaq; the interview with Saullu Nakasuk was conducted by Nancy Kisa and Bernice Kootoo; and Pauloosie Angmarlik was interviewed by Myna Ishulutak and Eena Alivaqtuq. The students wrote essays based on their interviews, which are included in the book.

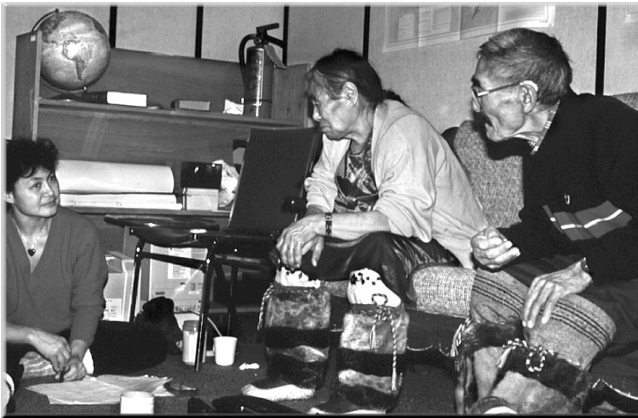
The first week, the course followed a traditional pattern: tables were placed in rows and the main emphasis was on instruction. Students listened to taped interviews with elders and discussed texts. Kenn Harper, Noel McDermott and Maaki Kakkik gave guest lectures on various subjects.

In the second week, the room was rearranged. Tables were placed in a square to create a more informal atmosphere, and the emphasis was shifted from instruction to practice. The morning interviews focused on life stories; in the afternoons, a general question-round on selected themes was organized. The interview situation was by no means a normal situation: as elders are held in great respect, students were not accustomed to subjecting them to long lists of questions.



Ooleepika, Hervé, Elisapee and Aaju with her son Kaalinnuaq.

The elders, however, were very helpful and encouraged students to ask questions and to overcome their initial shyness. Elisapee Ootoova stated, “You shouldn’t be wary of asking us any questions as we are not at home.” The first interviews were nevertheless a bit rusty; both students and elders had to learn how to deal with the uncomfortable situation of interviewing. The students found it difficult to prepare questions, and we heard the frequent complaint, “I’m out of questions.” But the interviews continued: whenever one student was out of questions, the others took over, giving the interviewer some time for reflection and formulation of new questions. This process strengthened a feeling of trust among the students.



Saullu and Pauloosie from Pangnirtung sitting on the couch being interviewed by Aaju.

At the end of the second week, Susan Enuaraq suggested we remove the chairs and tables. That worked out well and the situation became much more relaxed. Students and instructors sat on the floor while the elders were seated on a couch. The emphasis shifted gradually from interviews in teams to interviews in which the whole group participated. This setup proved to be the most effective in terms of eliciting information. The context of a group interview was experienced by the elders as a natural situation, in which they spoke more easily on many issues. Various elements were gradually

introduced in the course to create a more informal context which would facilitate the interviews. Thus, strings were handed out so that elders and students could play cat's-cradle while listening or talking, and in the third week Anne Schreiner, the residence manager, provided the group with muffins and cookies which, in addition to a supply of coffee and tea, proved very helpful in creating a more relaxed atmosphere.

Attendance at the course was very good. No student missed more than a half day. Each day, the first hour of the course was used to prepare for the interviews, and the last hour was devoted to preparing and writing the essays and life stories. This proved to be much more effective than asking the students to do this work at home, as they had families to take care of.

This first course in oral traditions was an experiment for us. The design that had been developed was continually adapted during the course. We began with the firm conviction that the students would do well provided they were given the opportunity to develop their own interests and approaches. We started from the genuine interests of Inuit students in their own culture and traditions.

The elders were very knowledgeable as well as modest. They had no wish to speak about things of which they had no personal experience, but they wished to teach the students by giving an account of what they had heard and seen themselves. The following exchange between Saullu and Eena illustrates this point:

Saullu: I'm only telling you about what I've experienced. I'm not going to tell you about anything I haven't experienced.

Eena: Yes.

Saullu: Even if it's something I know about, if I haven't experienced it, I'm not going to tell about it.

Or, an exchange among Julia, Saullu and Pauloosie:

Julia: Sometimes when you are telling about something, I hear you saying, "I can't talk about what I haven't experienced." Did you get told...?

Saullu: Yes.

Julia: One is not to talk about something without having experienced it?

Saullu: Yes. One is not to talk about something just from hearsay, because it is too easy to speak a falsehood. It is not desirable to tell untruths.

Julia: Yes.

Pauloosie: The lie would come out later, or if the true story were told, the apparent lie.

Saullu: Yes. That's the way it was.

Pauloosie: Having heard about it just once, knowing... I have already stated that I can say that I don't know anything about it if I have only heard about it just once. If at a later time someone were to tell about it like it really is, and though I did not intentionally lie, I would be like someone who had lied. Thinking about my own reputation, I have continued this as a practice.

The elders spoke with great sincerity. Not only the content of the information but also the style in which it was presented were very impressive. Thus the interviews conveyed not only old traditions of Inuit society, but also styles of thinking and social interaction, expressing central values of traditional Inuit society.

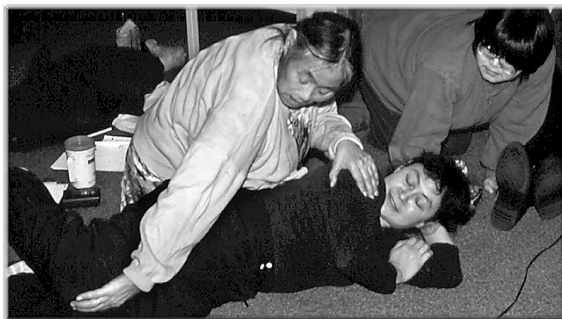
Saullu: It is not possible to forget the words of our elders, when we had our elders as the ones who gave us instructions. Even so, what one heard as a child keeps on coming back even though it is not always on your mind.

The production and transmission of knowledge in Inuit society

One of the themes of the course was how children were instructed in Inuit society, before the introduction of schools. For Inuit, instruction was always rooted in practice. Children learned by observing their elders and imitating their behaviour, and received directions and instructions in relation to the practice itself. Thus, children might be encouraged to sew, but that did not imply that elders carefully instructed children how to go about it. Children had ample opportunity to observe adults sewing, and they were thought to be perfectly capable of trying to do it on their own. Once they had completed a job, however, elders might comment on it, and sometimes a child had to start again from scratch. (See the essay by Nancy Kisa.) Knowledge was produced in relation to practice. Children were taught to develop their skills; this included using whatever was appropriate, and the use of modern techniques or implements had no negative connotations whatsoever. Inuit were always prepared to adopt new methods and materials if that proved to be advantageous. Obviously, however, those methods and skills that had withstood the test of time received much attention. Thus, Inuit clothing had reached a high degree of perfection. Young girls not only had to master the basic techniques before they would be allowed to marry, but were also taught design, ornamentation and styles of clothing. Whenever it proved useful, new implements such as steel needles or ornaments such as glass beads were adopted. A balance of experience and innovation is central to the production and transmission of knowledge. The elders would relate to the young hunters how they hunted caribou with bows and arrows, but that did not mean they disapproved of the use of guns. In qualifying the knowledge of the elders as "traditional," we should never forget that it was always directed to the future, intended to give a perspective to younger generations so that they were better equipped to face the changes they were facing.

Children were taught ideas and values that existed in Inuit society. These ideas and values could be expressed in stories, in comments, or in corrections of behaviour. Generally, children did not ask elders to instruct them, but the elders took the initiative in preparing and advising them whenever they thought it appropriate. In fact, the great respect in which elders were held often meant that young people were reluctant to pose questions to elders unless they were invited to do so.

As we have discussed, a context was created in class in which elders were expected to talk and students were expected to ask questions, and both had to come to terms with this unfamiliar situation. The elders repeatedly encouraged the students to pose questions and the students had to overcome their initial embarrassment in doing so. In this way, a situation was created that was also totally focused on practice. This context was effective to some extent because it was not “traditional;” elders were suddenly involved in the context of modern education. They were flown to Iqaluit and had to spend long hours in the rather impersonal environment of the residence, but they adapted wonderfully to it.



Frédéric Laugrand

Saullu instructing the students in the skills of a midwife.

The elders were not only instructing the young students about practices and customs which existed when they were young, but they also connected their descriptions of these customs and practices to their own views of modern society and current practices and values. We have to assume that this is a “traditional” practice. This is exactly what “production of knowledge” aims at: relating the ideas and practices of the past to the situation at hand, and making them relevant to a new generation which will face new problems and challenges.

Traditional knowledge is not something abstract and separated from the context in which it is produced, but is always related to the present. In this respect, it contrasts with the modern schooling system which sets great value on the absorption of objectified knowledge. In the interviews, the elders repeatedly expressed their disappointment with the modern schooling system and wondered whether they had been wise in sending their children to these modern schools which taught nothing about

Inuit life and values. They thought the schools played a part in alienating children from their roots.

The nature of Inuit knowledge

For a long time, Inuit were considered to be a non-literate people. All knowledge was thought to be passed on orally. In fact, this image is distorted. Syllabics were introduced to Inuit more than a hundred years ago and Inuit have been reading and writing since then. Proportionally, Inuit may have been even more literate than the average European country at the turn of the century. This said, we must take into account that literary traditions held a specific place in Inuit society. Literacy related to Christianity (reading the Bible and hymn books), and to practical purposes such as letters, accounting, and even the writing of diaries. But the passing on of knowledge still remained based on oral traditions. Even today, modern Inuit students often find literary texts describing traditional customs and practices boring. To them, these texts lack life and do not incite much interest.

Most ethnographic texts tend to reconstruct Inuit knowledge as an objective body of knowledge. The idea that knowledge should be objective and true has a long history in the West. The classic definition of truth as an *adaequatio rei et intellectus* is instructive. The image formed in the mind is true if that image is adequate to the thing itself. The truth of a statement is therefore not based on the authority of the speaker but on its relation to reality. If the form of the statement and reality itself correspond to each other, the statement is true. This approach to truth obviously had great advantages in the development of science in Western society, as it freed truth from the constraints of social relationships. Neither the state nor the church should impose its truth on science. This approach works very well with respect to the natural sciences, but becomes more complicated with respect to the social sciences and humanities. Here, the construction of a body of knowledge that is generally accepted as true is much more complicated. Examining anthropology alone, for example, it becomes immediately clear that the scientific insights of preceding generations are completely rejected today. Renowned anthropologists stated that Inuit were savages, that they were not capable of rational thinking, or that they did not have social organization but were held together by some sort of herd instinct. In reading these anthropological texts, we see that the distinctions between data, opinions, value judgments and so on are often very vague. Birket-Smith writes, "*Der herdentrieb ist es, der Eskimos zusammenhalt.*" ("It is the herd-instinct that keeps the Eskimos together.") Reading this statement, we cannot infer whether it is based on information obtained from an informant, from a careful and systematic comparison of Inuit and a herd of animals, from a discussion between Birket-Smith and a learned colleague specializing in cattle, or from Birket-Smith's himself. The problem is not so much that Birket-Smith was not a good anthropologist; the problem is that

anthropological texts tend to present information in such a way that the distinctions between observations, inferences, hearsay and so on are by no means clear. Statements such as, "Inuit are hunters," "Inuit are non-literate," "Inuit are very flexible and dynamic," can be made by anyone, without giving a clear indication of how he arrived at that particular conclusion. The knowledge presented is, in many respects, completely taken out of context. Anthropologists tend to quote their sources precisely when they refer to other anthropologists ("Rasmussen states, according to Boas..." and so on), but when they refer to Inuit elders who are the source of specific information, anthropologists usually are no longer very precise. They may quote Inuit from time to time, but the general pattern is to present the data as an objective body of knowledge in which data, theory and opinion are integrated. A good example is the way Knud Rasmussen handled the famous statement of the old *angakkuq* Ava on fear. Ava explained to Rasmussen that he could not explain why people suffered, why there had to be hunger or starvation. He stated, "We do not believe, we fear." This statement must have appealed to Rasmussen, as he had already emphasized in his book on Polar Eskimos, in 1908, that fear was the essence of Inuit religion. He made Ava's statement into the motto of his discussion of the beliefs of the Iglulingmiut. Thus he inferred from the statement of an individual a general statement about the nature of Inuit religion.

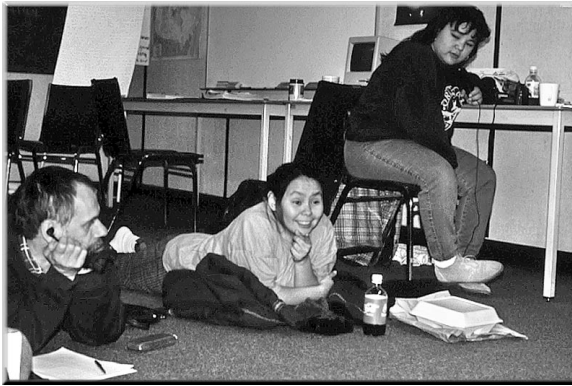
We suggest that it is precisely this way of presenting information that makes it less interesting to Inuit. We suppose that for most Inuit, the interest of the statement on fear is based on the fact that it is made by Ava. Nobody will assume that Ava intends to give anything but his own personal opinion and conviction. Moreover, the statement was made at a time when Ava was considering conversion to Christianity. In that sense, the famous statement not so much reflects an assessment of traditional Inuit religion, but informs us about ideas and values expressed by an old *angakkuq* during a time of transition and conversion.

Inuit language and culture tends to set little value on generalizations. Not the movement from the specific to the general, but, inversely, the movement from the general to the specific is what is important. One should be precise in statements, specifying time, place, subject and object. General statements are viewed as vague and confusing, whereas specific statements are seen as providing much more interesting information.

In Inuit society, we are dealing with a completely different tradition of knowledge. All knowledge is social by nature and the idea of objectified true knowledge holds little attraction or fascination.

Elders have always been held in high respect in Inuit society. Their knowledge and experience was supposed to guide the younger generations. This knowledge was highly personal and rooted in practice. It would be a mistake to assume that we are dealing with a body of objectified knowledge about which all elders agreed. Each elder had his

own knowledge and experience and was prepared to acknowledge the value of different opinions and experiences related by others. In the course of the interviews, the elders professed great interest in each other's comments. The point was not so much to come to a common opinion, but to come to an awareness of the existing variations. In that respect, it did not matter whether the elders came from different places. Variation is an essential characteristic of the knowledge of the elders. As each one has his or her own knowledge, it is absolutely essential that this knowledge is seen as related only to that particular elder. Once the source, more specifically the name of the elder, is lost, the knowledge loses its roots and becomes devoid of much value to most Inuit. It is essential, therefore, that in the presentation of these interviews we indicate exactly which elder made which statement.



Frédéric Laujrand

Susan and Jarich on the floor. Ooleepika listening at the table, interpreting.

As traditional knowledge is not objectively given, but always produced in relational terms, we must remain aware of the context. In traditional Inuit society, knowledge was related to practice. That also pertains to the transmission of knowledge. There is no value in talking when it is not functional. In the course, a group of young students interviewed elders because they wanted to learn about traditional culture. The context may have been artificial to some extent, but elders as well as students adapted immediately and made good use of the opportunity it provided. The production of traditional knowledge required the exchange of questions and answers. The elders emphasized repeatedly that they could only talk if there were questions. Here we are dealing with an essential feature of traditional knowledge; it is produced as an exchange.

The questions of the students triggered the memories of the elders. Their experiences come to life again and prove to be of great value to the younger students, who can now profit from these experiences. The elders acknowledge that the students

bring their memories to life again; the students are grateful that they are allowed to share those memories. This exchange creates the particular atmosphere of the interview sessions, characterized by great concentration by all the concerned parties.

The texts

The book consists of interviews with the elders, essays by the students, and stories collected in the context of the oral traditions project. The first part consists of the life stories of four elders, with the lifestories taking shape in the course of the interviews. Thus the interviews themselves constitute a process: the flow of the lifestory and that of the interview cannot be clearly separated. In a way, this corresponds to the way elders instructed children in the past: knowledge is constructed in practice. The elders were well aware that the students were sometimes having a hard time; sometimes they were out of questions and sometimes they were embarrassed. But the elders encouraged them to go on and tried to make it as easy as possible for them. In this way, the interviews present not only the contents of traditional knowledge but also its form and mode of production. We therefore thought it essential to maintain the basic structure. In editing the text, we have tried to preserve the style and character of the interviews, only omitting repetitions and interjections due to misunderstandings, etc., as well as affirmations which break the flow of the text. The first interviews required the most editing, as students still had to explore the idea of a lifestory. Gradually, they became aware of the various ways to handle a lifestory and how to explore various issues. The interviews of the last week were therefore more clearly focused in many respects, concentrating on such issues as midwifery and the transition to Christianity. Maaki Kakkik took care of the translation of the first week, Ooleepika Ikkidluak those of the second week. The translations are often quite literal and follow the Inuktitut closely, and we have tried to keep them like that in the editing process. Conveying the spirit of the interviews was most important to us.

The purpose of the course was not only to assist the students in collecting life stories, but also to support them in the development of their own research. This research was shaped in the form of essays presenting the ideas and customs of Inuit. This way of presenting Inuit knowledge obviously comes much closer to traditional Western ideas about the presentation of knowledge, and it posed quite a challenge to the students. It forced the students to think about their own traditions in a more or less *qallunaat* way, and they were only prepared to do that to a certain extent. Whereas we tend to attach great importance to the ethnographic literature on a subject, for the students the information of the elders remained much more important because it was more specific. In reading the essays, it became immediately clear how much the students opted to rely on the interviews. The essays may therefore appear at first sight to resemble essays produced by Western students; but on closer scrutiny it becomes clear that they are

written from a totally different perspective, in which the authority of the elders remains unchallenged. In this way, the students succeeded in connecting traditional patterns of thought and knowledge to modern Western ones. We hope that in the future, young Inuit will be more and more successful in integrating their own ways of thinking with the requirements of modern Western society. It is quite clear that if Inuit are to succeed in preserving their own cultural identity, they should not just adopt Western ideas and values, but transform them so that they make sense in their own society and culture.

The book concludes with stories collected by students as well as by Alexina Kublu. Inuit are great storytellers who love to tell and listen to stories (*unikkaaqtuat*). They convey ideas and values, as illustrated by the story told by Hervé Paniaq about the woman who concealed her miscarriage. Susan Enuaraq developed her essay so that the history of her grandfather would become a “legend.” A good story gives history a new meaning and sense: the stories not only relate what happened in the past, but the storytellers also provide them with a sense that makes them relevant to the present. A story is still a privileged means of conveying knowledge in Inuit society, and these stories therefore constitute an excellent ending for this book.

We wish to thank the elders as well as the students. As instructors, we learned much from them.

Alexina Kublu
Frédéric Laugrand
Jarich Oosten



Sally Mikijuk

The whole group at the end of the course.