

Seeking Identity

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Abstract

Inuit need to know and understand about colonization before they can begin decolonizing. How can anyone begin decolonizing when they do not know what they are decolonizing from? You have to name and recognize the impact of colonization in order to start the process of decolonization. This paper addresses my own need to decolonize by describing some of the colonizing forces that have had a negative impact on my life. These forces include experiences in a hospital while undergoing treatment for tuberculosis, as well as my forced attendance at a residential school and an arranged marriage. It considers my experiences as an Inuit educator in the late sixties and early seventies when the school system focused on an assimilationist agenda. Finally, the paper reflects on my own search for Inuit identity and healing. It describes my work with Elders and the way it has enabled me to change, decolonize and understand what has taken place for Inuit over the last 60 years. Many indigenous people all over the world have begun to decolonize and Inuit in Nunavut are now starting this process, which is prompting a rediscovery and reclaiming of our culture, traditions, and language.

Keywords: colonization, decolonization, Inuit, Nunavut, reclaiming, assimilationist

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Introduction

I was born in Salliq, now called Coral Harbour, Southampton Island, situated right in the middle of the northern part of Hudson Bay. I was well received, thank God, and not left as a victim of infanticide, which did take place shortly before I was born. My grandmothers were all eager to name me. My full name is Saimanaaq (my adopted grandmother named me after a relative), Qinnguq Maatai (named by my step-grandmother after her father-in-law), Uuliniq (named by my paternal grandmother), Patricia (by a Roman Catholic priest who baptized me), Tattuinee (my maiden name), and Netser, which is my married name. I am a typical Inuk with many names, and I am proud of each name that was given to me by my many grandmothers that led me to who I am today.

Each grandmother blessed me as they named me. They regarded me and respected me as they had regarded and respected my namesakes. One of my grandmothers, who I was around the most, would tell me that I have my namesake, Saimanaaq's, dark skin and gifted hands, and that encouraged me with much pride each time she told me this with such tender love and pride. There were members of my father's family that called me grandfather, or father-in-law, and they made me clothing that my namesake had worn, or they fed me meat prepared in the same way they had for my namesake, Qinnguq. My paternal grandmother just loved me and that was genuine love, and she never treated me any other way. She showed me unconditional love. All these people had a part in preparing me for who I would become as an adult and had blessed me to be who I am today. I was a very happy, innocent, loved child while I was at home, and I knew nothing but happiness and freedom in my own beautiful homeland. I will always call Coral Harbour, Nunavut, my home, and I will hold it close to my heart forever.

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Hospital Horror

In 1961, when I was eight years of age, I was diagnosed with tuberculosis by a doctor who came in the ship called the C.D. Howe. I was so excited when the ship came, as I recall. It meant that my whole family would wash up and get ready to go to the ship on a Peterhead boat and be examined. Little did I know that I would be diagnosed with minor tuberculosis on one of my lungs, and that meant I was to leave my family to go to a hospital. I found out later on that I would have to leave home to an unknown place all by myself without an escort. I think it was early fall after the first snow fall that my parents were told by a Hudson's Bay manager that it was time for me to leave for the hospital, because I seem to recall some snow on the ground when I was taken to the airport. I vaguely remember holding my mother's hand as she handed me over to a tall *qablunaaq*, who apparently was the pilot. I wasn't crying at all, maybe because I was too curious about seeing an airplane up close for the first time in my life, and that I was going to be one of the passengers on that same plane. I then remember distinctly being lifted by a tall white man on to the plane, and I sat myself on what looked more like a bench. Once I sat down, I could see some of my community members sitting across me, but I recognized only my *uyuruaryuk*, my grandfather's sister, who called me *sakik (angaarjuk)* meaning uncle. Then it seemed to become dark and cold inside the plane, and that is when I felt like I had a lump in my throat, and I became quite emotional. I must have fallen asleep on the long loud plane ride to Clear Water Lake, Manitoba Sanitorium, because I don't have any recollection of arriving at my destination or my trip to the hospital.

I seem to have slept for days, and my next recollection is being in a white-walled building, with tall dark nurses around my bed that was covered in white blankets. These nurses had white hats with two black lines across the top of their hats; some had only one black line.

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When I was looking around I remember seeing other children lying in rows of beds across from me and in the same row as my bed, and the horrible strong smell in the building, like Dettol. I started crying and the dark nurses came to my aid to talk to me, but I could not understand the foreign language they were speaking. I cried harder, but it did not do me any good at all. I must have cried myself to sleep each day in the first few months I was in the hospital. I was so lost and homesick that that is all I can recall on most occasions when I am asked about my hospital experiences as a child.

As the long days and months passed, I found myself sitting up more, and I started communicating more with my fellow patients. None of us patients were allowed to get out of our beds, and for an active eight-year-old that was so frustrating that I started playing tag by getting out of my bed as soon as the nurses were not looking. Once I was caught when I was out of my bed, and the nurses punished me by tying me to my bed, with lots of strings that would be more like a harness for a dog if I described it with what I was familiar with from home. There were other children tied to their beds, as well, and this happened to each of us whenever we were caught out of bed.

When it came to eating unfamiliar foods, like bananas, I would pretend to eat the banana and leave the peel in the tray, and then I would hide the fruit inside my blanket. I didn't like the texture of the fruit at all, right from the beginning; it was too soft to chew on. We were told every day to finish the food that was served to us on a plate in the tray at each mealtime. As soon as the nurses disappeared, I would quickly run to the bathroom and flush the banana down the toilet. I never got caught because I was a pretty fast runner.

Unfortunately, the little girl who was lying next to my bed was not as mischievous as I was, and she paid a tremendous price for not finishing her full plate each suppertime. She would

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vomit all over her plate whenever she tried to eat. She could not keep anything down, and when the nurses came around to collect our trays, they would notice the little girl's tray with her vomit on the plate and force her to eat her own vomit! Each day she would eat her own vomit forced and watched by a nurse until she ate it all. I would cry in my heart watching her and try to encourage her not to vomit when the nurses left with her tray. I really thought the nurses had no heart because of their cruelty to this unfortunate child, and there was nothing we could do but to watch in horror! Here she was in the hospital to be cured from her sickness and experience the utmost cleanliness to help her heal. Instead, the hospital staff was making her sick with her own vomit.

There was so much injustice that took place in that hospital, but being a child, I could not do anything to stop it from happening. I would lie in bed day after day looking down on the floor, and I would be able to see my family at home, around and inside the tent that we lived in surrounded by rocks and all the beautiful land that I called home. I had learned to visualize this same picture on the floor each time I was homesick for my precious family back home. I would just look down on the floor and visualize my family and all the things we did together. It seemed to keep my memory alive, and it made me happier to keep moving on with that renewed connection in hope that I would reunite one day with my family again. I would then start crying until I fell asleep; I did this almost every night.

Some days were worse than others, especially when I would be taken to the doctor who would pretend to examine me almost every other day. I hated it with a passion when I was picked up by nurses to be examined by the awful doctor who would call for me. The nurses would force me to sit in a wheelchair because I was not allowed to walk. I alone, plus the horrible doctor, were the only ones who seemed to know what went on behind those closed

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doors! I really do not know if the nurses knew what was actually happening in the examining room. The doctor would lay me down flat on my back and pretend to examine me, and try to talk to me, and I would never be able to understand what he was saying with my limited understanding of English at that time. Apparently, and as I now know, he was sexually molesting me each time I saw him for a year and a half! How was I, as a child, to know that he was not supposed to do this to me while he was pretending to examine me! I was just a child with limited understanding or knowledge of what the doctor was to do while examining me, and I had no idea that he was not supposed to do that to me! I am sure I was not the only child to be treated in this way, but we never spoke about it to anyone. I kept silent about this sexual abuse for many years, because I always felt dirty, angry and uncomfortable after I found out what really took place. The injustice that was done to me by someone who was supposed to help heal me and in a place was supposed to be the safest place for me on earth has emotionally scarred me in a way that has taken many years to address! For many years, whenever I heard about sex or sexual body parts, I would cringe and get extremely angry, and I would show my anger emotionally. This former abuse scarred me deeply, and I carried it until I was in my late forties.

Prior to Residential School

My first recollection prior to the time I was sent out to school is a day that I went to the school in Coral Harbour at the beginning of the new school year, around September 1, 1965. When I arrived, the principal did not know what to do with me. All my classmates had gone early in August to attend the residential school called Churchill Vocational Centre. I am sure the principal thought I was way too young at the age of 12 to be sent out to the residential school, but I could not be taught any further with Western education at home. There was no choice but to send me out to advance my education. I was really excited to be going out to see my fellow

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students that had already gone to the residential school, and yet at the same time I was afraid of the unknown.

On September 9, 1965, at the age of 12, I had to leave for school in Churchill, Manitoba. I did not leave alone, as I was sent out with two other students, and we did not reach our destination until it was very late and dark that evening. I remember looking out the window, and as soon as I saw the deep darkness outside that tiny window of the DC-3 airplane, I suddenly felt alone again, as I had felt before when I was eight years of age on my way to the horrible hospital years earlier. The plane ride got really tiresome due to the long three-hour journey directly from Coral Harbour to Churchill, Manitoba.

I remember crying again on this trip, missing my mother because she was to come with me on the plane to deliver her baby in Churchill, Manitoba, at the hospital. Instead, she went into labor just as it was time to go on the long boat ride to the airport eleven miles from our community. I remember my father taking my mother to the Nursing Station and then quickly coming back to pack my bag and to see me off, though he had to leave me at the dock all alone waiting for the boat to take me to the airport. He needed to go tend to my mother to take her home after she delivered the baby. While I was waiting for my boat ride to the airport, my three-year old brother came to the dock to see me off all alone, and he wanted to come with me but, of course, I could not take him. My grandmother had not seen him take off from their house, so he was there all by himself without an adult to take care of him after I left. I was really worried, and I started to become emotionally sick about leaving him alone at the dock. He started crying wanting to come with me, and I did not have the courage to ask if my little brother could come along, even though this was my uncle's boat. So, we left him there, crying and stomping and wanting to come with me, since I always took care of him! He was longing to be with me

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(*ungayuq*), and I watched him until I could not see him anymore, but that picture stayed in my mind for many days and months until I got home the next summer on the first week of July 1966. I never heard about the baby my mother delivered until I was home in the summer and finally remembered after a while that my mother had gone into labor just before she left. I asked what kind of baby she had, and she said that the child was a baby boy. I asked, "Where is he? I want to meet him." My mother sadly replied that the baby had been adopted by my aunt and uncle from our community. Apparently, her uncle came to the Nursing Station and took the baby boy and walked out of the building without saying a word to my dear humble mother. She could not counteract because her uncle was above her within the Aivilik Inuit laws.

I attended the residential school for three and a half years altogether, but I did go home for short summer breaks for part of July and August. Each year I was in the residence for ten and a half months at a time. I was being raised by a European supervisor from Ireland in a *Qablunaaq* way, and we called it the modern way of life in our early teens. We were so happy, and saw this new way of life as being so much easier to live than the Inuit way of life. Today we know it was the colonized way of living because we were made to live like foreigners and became unrecognizable to our parents! We were being assimilated into the *Qablunaaq* culture and civilized. During the time I was in Churchill, I enjoyed the experience, just like many others who attended this school. Unfortunately, as we attended this school, we were forgetting our Inuit heritage in every way, and we were losing our Inuit language as well.

In 1968, we were finally able to go home for Christmas, and once I did make it home for the holidays, I was ecstatic and overjoyed! I came home as a modern, colonized young woman after being in Churchill for three and a half years. Little did I know what was ahead for me, just as I was at the highest peak in my life as an energetic 15 year old, a foolish young woman who

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was not thinking of marriage at all! To my horror, I learned the very next day after my arrival home that it had been arranged that I marry a man, whom I did not know intimately nor had I any participation whatsoever in choosing him as my life partner. I did not want to marry, and I was not ready, but I could not go anywhere else, no matter how unhappy I was. There was no way out for me at all at the time when Inuit ways were still very strong in my community, and in the makeup of the Aivilingmiut people, my parents were lower in rank in hierarchy. My parents had older siblings or parents above them that made the final decisions, even if my parents did not agree.

To my dismay, I never did go back after Christmas and also missed my final year of school in Churchill, Manitoba because I got married in March 1969 at the age of 16. I thought I would be unhappy for the rest of my life as I felt I was way too young to be married. I began to think that I would not amount to anything because of the fact that I was forced to leave school in the middle of the year, but there are always people around you who are able to recognize your potential. I was not even looking for a job when the principal of the school in Coral Harbour asked me to work as a classroom assistant and teach Inuktitut to the students. You may not be looking for them, but opportunities in life do come along once in a while, and that is how I began my career as an educator in 1969.

Beginning My Career

At the Federal Day School in Coral Harbour in September 1969, when I was only 16 years of age, I was assigned to teach Inuktitut to the students under the direction of the English teachers in kindergarten and grade one. I had to assist the kindergarten and the grade one 'beginner' teachers in every way they needed help. I was tasked with making ditto copies to assist the teacher's work, translating songs and stories into Inuktitut from English, and

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translating for the teachers when they were delivering their instructions to the students. I was also tasked with assisting slow learners to teach them how to read in both English and Inuktitut in grade one.

I had no prior training at all before I was placed in the school to begin my career as a teacher assistant. I was asked to teach the students how to read and write in syllabics without any guidance. When I first began teaching in 1969, there was no curriculum, no program and no 'how to' guides to assist me with teaching Inuktitut reading and writing. This made me feel inadequate, and it really frustrated me as an Inuk, for I felt I had nothing to call my own. It made me feel like an empty vessel, ashamed and embarrassed for the first time in my life. Through my colonized eyes at that time, I really thought Inuit were inferior to the Europeans who I believed had everything and knew everything I had would ever need. After all, I had just come out of a residential school in December of 1968 under the authority of *Qablunaat* teachers. I did not realize that I had gone through a process of internal colonization that affected so many Aboriginal students who attended residential schools and rejected aspects of their own culture. As described in the document *Healing the Impact of Colonization, Genocide, Missionization, and Racism on Indigenous Populations* by Bastien, Kremer, Kuokkanen, & Vickers (2003), this was a form of cultural genocide, and this loss of culture contributed to a form of internal rejection of self and identity that led to issues including alcohol addiction.

These assumptions of the nature of humankind have allowed for the genocidal policies of residential schools. The residential school era was the most significant and comprehensive governmental effort, in cooperation with the churches, to alter the reality of Indigenous people. Chrisjohn, Young, & Maraum (1997) point out that, "in any intellectually honest appraisal, Indian Residential Schools were genocide" (p. 30). In these institutes, for example, the

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Tsimshain (Indigenous people of the Pacific northwest) were systematically conditioned to believe that their ancestral ways were inferior to British ways of interpreting the world. When they returned to their communities they found themselves alienated. It is no surprise that addictions and family violence increased.

As the years of trying to teach the Inuktitut language to students of Coral Harbour passed, I started to receive some teaching experience and training and began to realize that I had absolutely no idea who I was. Translating and transforming English materials and resources into Inuktitut was discouraging me, and I kept hearing Inuit complain about Inuktitut teachers through the media right across the north. Inuit who knew *Inuit Qaujimagatuqangit* started expressing concerns about how the Inuit teachers that were assigned by the Northwest Territories government to teach Inuktitut in the schools did not know the Inuit ways or the language. This was very true; the education system in the Eastern part of the Northwest Territories was governed by people from outside, using the Alberta curriculum. Most of us Inuit staff were acting as translators and classroom assistants, and we had only received a Western European education. We were not fully literate in Inuktitut. We knew very little about our culture after spending several years in the residential schools. When we returned, we were not trying to regain our cultural knowledge because we no longer valued it in the same way. Had I been a unilingual Inuk, I am sure I would have been one of those negative voices raising concerns about the lack of Inuit education in my own homeland. Due to my lack of understanding of my heritage and Inuit ways of teaching, I was extremely hurt when I started hearing these negative voices.

The negative voices about Inuit teachers and about Inuktitut as a language of instruction in the schools began to play like a broken record in my mind. It was exhausting to be an Inuit teacher who was translating from English to Inuktitut and then told that you are not doing a good

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job teaching Inuktitut by your own people. In my colonized understanding, I was doing everything beyond my calling in trying to keep my Inuktitut language alive, by making sure my teaching plans were the exact same quality as the English teachers teaching plans. Not once did it ever enter my mind that there was more to teaching in Inuktitut than just the Inuktitut language. I did not even think twice that Inuit had their own pedagogy and that they wanted their children to be taught their own ways of living through spirit, soul and body. I never even thought of inviting Elders to come and teach their stories and riddles until the *Inuuqatigiit* curriculum was being introduced to schools across the North, and the school I was working in, Leo Ussak School in Rankin Inlet, was asked to pilot the program.

Over all the years I had taught before the *Inuuqatigiit* program came out, I was teaching using Canadian mainstream curriculum. The curriculum guides, materials, songs and themes all came with colonial perspectives and not from an Inuit perspective at all, and it was affecting my spirit, soul and body. I was exhausting myself, punishing myself for not being able to meet the same standards as the teachers did in the English stream classes by working overtime every night to keep up. The first year I had my own classroom, I worked harder than anyone else in the school to meet the same standards that the English stream class met to have the best quality education for my Inuktitut class. I have learned recently that Inuit standards are highly rigid when it comes to maintaining language and culture. Inuit believe in lifelong learning and in holistic learning, but they have had to survive in an unforgiving environment where mistakes can cost a family their lives. We have lost touch with these standards and need to reclaim them again.

Seeking My Identity

I was also struggling at home as I adjusted back into traditional Inuit ways of living. I had suddenly become an Inuk wife and a young mother in the traditional sense within less than one

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year of returning home from the residential school. In the residential school, everything I did was in the Western European way, and whatever we learned in the school was all in English. Now, all of a sudden, I had to use traditional ways in the house under the strict direction of my new mother-in-law. I had so much to learn, and through trial and error I learned how to sew traditionally, to clean fox skins, and to complete other traditional chores at home under the sharp eyes of my mother-in-law. I had to relearn how to take care of my growing family through tears, trial, and error because I was not prepared for Inuit mothering when I had lived in the residential school for those three and a half years.

I have looked back to the time I spent in residential school, and I have blamed the decision makers for what I have lost and suffered in losing much of my culture and my tradition, which I will never regain fully again. Today, I am still struggling to keep up with my traditions and culture, as I am now finally learning more about my culture and *Inuit Qaujimagatuqangit* (Inuit knowledge they always knew) from the Elders of Nunavut that I have been privileged to work with.

Discovering that Identity Leads to Healing

The more I hear the Elders talk about *Inuit Qaujimagatuqangit* (Inuit knowledge they always knew) with so much wisdom, the more I regret losing so much of my culture; yet at the same time, I gain so much pride as I listen to the Elders during their meetings. They have so much to share, and they are so full of wisdom, and yet they always speak with humility. I now understand that I come from a group of people who are among the wisest peoples on earth. It inspires me to hear about how Inuit raised their children and the knowledge they are sharing about childrearing that involved thinking of the child as a whole person. The Inuit cared for and nurtured children even before they were born. Once a child was conceived, the Elders of the

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camp were told and from that point the nurturing process began. There were certain rules to follow for the mother-to-be until the baby was born, and this was to keep the mother and the baby safe and well. I am sure there was some spiritual aspect that made the mother very diligent in following what she had been asked until the baby was born, but I need to learn that as well. The unborn baby inside the mother already had the Elders planning the future of the child. They decided who the baby would be named after so they would carry on the name and the character of the person they had chosen for the baby.

Other Inuit across the barren land in the Yupik world believed in this as well. Napoleon (1996) writes, “Death came when the *anerneq* left the body due to injury, illness, or by the will of the person. The human spirit was a very powerful spirit and, like the spirits of other living creatures, was reborn when its name was given to newborn” (p. 7). As soon as the baby was born, there was an assigned midwife who would be the first to touch the baby, and this midwife would have been given the privilege of blessing the baby. That midwife would be like a god-mother/father of the baby throughout his or her life. The goal of blessing and naming a child was to ensure that this child would grow up to be an able human being, who would in turn become a successful contributor to the camp. The children were raised with an awareness of their whole being, of their spirit, soul, mind and body. The wise people that depended on each other for survival and for the well being of their people were most concerned and worked on ensuring their descendants would become able human beings, who would contribute to the well being of their whole community. This ensured the strong survival of Inuit through the ages.

Inuit language and culture were taught through stories such as *Kiviuq*, *Kaugjagjuk*, *Unigumasuittuq*, and through songs. There were 25 or more different genres of songs. This is according to an Elder I used to work with, Mariano Aupilaarjuk, who said that riddles made sure

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the Inuktitut language was spoken properly, without dropping the finals (personal communication, September 12, 1987). An example is this short riddle I learned from my late mother-in-law Annie Netser: “*Agvara unuaq qainnirnga kikpaqpakpara.*” This riddle was meant as a teaching tool and does not translate easily into English. There have been many pieces of antlers or tusks found with sketches or illustrations on them, and I am sure these were used to carry and deliver messages and to relay messages between camps. These illustrations or sketches on antlers or tusks usually seem to tell a hunting story because the sketches are usually of people in action with weapons and animals, such as caribou. Many of these artifacts have been found in old historical sites across the North. Inuit children were well informed, taught and nourished holistically with hands-on activities throughout their lives.

In the past, Inuit worked justly and appropriately to create harmony in order to have a prosperous camp. Principles and values were taught to the children and practiced to hone each child according to their unique individual gifts. It was important for the child to be taught and honed according to his or her talent to become a contributor with excellence to the community. The camps had everything necessary to meet all their people’s needs, from marriage counselors to someone who was taking care of the orphans, to feeding the hungry or anyone who was not able to provide for their families harmoniously. If there ever was an argument, then there were trained negotiators to make peace in the community. This person would most likely be the camp leader. Everyone was respectful and would honour their leaders, and this person would also be their spiritual leader who would have much power in their camps. Just as Harold Napoleon (1996) says,

Prior to the arrival of Western people, the Yupik were alone in their riverine and Bering Sea homeland-they and the spirit beings that made things the way they were. Within this

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homeland they were free and secure. They were ruled by the customs, traditions, and spiritual beliefs of their people, and shaped by these and their environment: the tundra, the river and the Bering Sea. (p. 4)

Shaming that Led to Self Destruction

I want to say when the colonizers came to the North the powerful and detailed Inuit discourse and wisdom I have referred to in my writing was never acknowledged; instead it was ridiculed, as were the beliefs of our people by the Western explorers, whalers, traders, missionaries and administrators who first met the Inuit. As Napoleon (1996) also writes “To the Western explorers, whalers, traders, and missionaries who first met them, the Yup’ik were considered backward savages steeped in superstition” (p. 5).

According to Elders of Nunavut of today, drum dancing was one practice that was demonized as a dangerous superstition, especially by the missionaries. There was no way of conversing in Inuktitut to explain how and why Inuit drum danced and assumptions were made based on the experience of the colonizers. There was a language barrier because Inuit were unilingual speakers of their language, and they had had no outside contact before the first Europeans started coming to the North. As Mariano Aupilaarjuk explained to me (personal communication, September 12, 1987), in the past drum dancing was used in many ways, and he said he could remember 25 different genres that were used just at the moment. Drum dances were used to celebrate, judge, compete, and for so many other things, as well. The lyrics of the songs used for drum dancing were uniquely different from the everyday Inuktitut language. The words were depictions of the everyday language, so if the song was about a hunting experience at the floe edge, then certain sounds made by the drum referred to the ice or floe edge. The animals hunted would also be depicted by appearance or color. For example, in the songs a

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caribou is called a *nagjulirjuaq*, polar bear is *qakuqturjuaq*, and a musk ox is *qirniqturjuaq*, and so on. Incidents, misfortunes and different stories all used depiction words rather than the everyday language.

I always think that if these drum dancing songs were allowed to carry on amongst our people, learning another language such as English would have been much easier. Our students would have had an easy time understanding what metaphoric languages meant, promoting higher achievement in both Inuktitut and English. Many of the stories in Inuktitut use analogies, and the person being told such stories was supposed to find the meaning of the story for his or her own life path. The missionaries tried to cleanse the Inuit of what they thought were evil practices, and in trying to rid Inuit of shamanistic practices, the missionaries also wiped out important practices that would have maintained respect amongst the Inuit today. Maintaining the belief systems would have enabled Inuit to continue the deep beliefs and practices that promoted respect, hope and love and enabled them to have faith in their ways and in who they were as a people. As Napoleon (1996) writes,

The priests and missionaries forbade parents from teaching their children about Yuuyaraq and about the spirit world. They forbade the parents and children from practicing old customs and rituals based on Yuuyaraq, calling them taboo. Again, the survivors obeyed and their children grew up ignorant about themselves and about their history. If the children asked about the old culture, they were told by their parents not to ask such questions, as if they were ashamed or hiding something. From listening to the priest and observing the behavior of their parents, the children would come to believe that there was something wrong with their people, some dark secret to be ashamed of. (p. 19)

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I have heard many similar stories from my peers, and I have asked my parents, as well, and their responses are very similar to the beliefs that Napoleon writes about. The old world that our parents knew had slowly started to dwindle, and now there are many confused Inuit in the North. Many of our people have turned to drugs and alcohol, which are a form of self-destruction that lead to family violence and self-harming. Our young men are being incarcerated at higher rates than ever before in Inuit history. Everyone is asking why this is taking place! In this day and age, we are looking for answers in every possible way we know how. I believe the answer lies in the story that Harold Napoleon has written about the Yupik people of Alaska, who went through devastation because of a great death caused by the 1900 influenza epidemic, which originated from Nome, Alaska, US. Napoleon (1996) says that this untold story has caused the Yupik people to turn to practices of self-destruction, where most of his people have been incarcerated for petty causes and many have fallen into drug and alcohol abuse, as well. He believes that Inuit are going through post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) caused by colonization, and I agree with him. He argues,

Not all the survivors of the Great Death suffered from posttraumatic stress disorder, but a great many did. This may explain the great thirst for liquor that whalers and other Westerners found in the Eskimos along the Bering Sea and the Arctic. (1996, p. 16)

Inuit need to begin to deal with our pain from being colonized and to begin our path to decolonization. This is the only way to forgive and move on, as Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) writes,

There are numerous oral stories which tell of what it means, what it feels like, to be present while your history is erased before your eyes, dismissed as irrelevant, ignored or rendered as the lunatic ravings of drunken old people. The negation of indigenous views

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of history was a critical part of asserting colonial ideology, partly because such views were regarded as clearly 'primitive' and 'incorrect' and mostly because they challenged and resisted the mission of colonization. (p. 29).

I have been seeking healing since March 21, 2002, after participating in Elder Advisory meetings and hearing about *Inuit Qaujimjatuqangit*. These meetings have helped me tremendously to begin my path towards decolonizing my mind, body and soul. Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) writes,

Indigenous peoples have also mounted a critique of the way history is told from the perspective of the colonizers, at the same time, however, indigenous groups have argued that history is important for understanding the present and that reclaiming history is a critical and essential aspect of decolonization. (p. 29)

The Nunavut Department of Education has allowed the Curriculum and School Services Department to hire Elder Advisors from the time the office in Arviat, Nunavut, was established in 1999. These Elder Advisors meet with other Elders from all across Nunavut three times a year. These gatherings are organized by Joe Karetak, the District Education Authority (DEA) Coordinator, and I have had the privilege of working with him as a co-facilitator and coordinator, as well. Sitting with Elders and talking about *Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit* has opened my understanding about how Inuit lived before and after the European contacts.

Inuit ways of child rearing have been the main focus because we work with kindergarten to grade twelve, but Inuit ways are all-inclusive; it has been very hard to separate Inuit ways and the knowledge about who they are as a people from before birth until after death. From my observation, whenever there is a new member during these meetings, on the second day the Elders who are new to these meetings tend to become emotional because they recognize the Inuit

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ways in these meetings. They cry not because they are sad, but because they are grateful to hear again their old ways of being spirit, soul, mind and body.

One time an Elder from Cambridge Bay, Nunavut, was sharing a story from his region about Inuit that kept on celebrating in a big *Iglu* which they called *Qaggiq*, using his own dialect, and as he told the story not many of us could understand the Elder's story fully. We could not understand his dialect, and so were not able to understand fully what the story was about or the meaning of the story. But, there was one elderly woman from Iglulik, Nunavut, who started to make noises of joy and wept at the same time. She apparently understood every word and recognized the same story that her father use to tell to his children when they were small, using the same exact Inuktitut words the Elder had used to tell the story. The particular dialect the Elder was using to tell the story is not spoken or used by the people in Iglulik any longer.

The lady from Iglulik retold the story to the group of Elders using her Iglulik dialect, and we finally understood the story. The story begins with everyone gathering for a *qaggiq* seasonal celebration in a big *iglu*. This group of Inuit partied for days eating Inuit delicacies, swapping wives, and playing string games, and they continued to celebrate for many more days. Eventually, they started running out of food because no one bothered to go hunting for food. Everyone in the big *iglu* just kept on celebrating and continued to play string games, and so on. As the days passed, people in the *qaggiq* started dying, and yet they were still playing games and didn't pay attention to what was happening around them. The *qaggik* continued and the weather became bad, so no one could go out hunting or leave the *iglu*. The people in the *qaggiq* started to notice human heads around the edge of the *iglu* with long hair and no bodies attached. Apparently, when a person died that person was being eaten by fellow Inuit, who were still concentrating only on the *qaggiq*. Eventually, they were all dying off, and in the end, there was

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only one couple left. This couple finally came to their senses and left the *iglu*, and the weather cleared up at that moment. The couple had no food to take on their journey, so they took human rib cage remains and off they went. These two were the only ones who came out alive from that enduring *qaggik*, and they were able to pass on that story to other Inuit. The Elders explained that this is a moral story with a message, and the message is that it is not wise to seek after pleasures only of this world. If you seek after only games and what makes you happy in life, then you will never amount to anything but to being a beggar, or you will become poor with nothing to call your own.

Hearing these kinds of stories and understanding the wisdom of my ancestors has really encouraged me to accept my identity and to become the Inuk I was created to be, one without shame.

We Need Support to Begin the Road to Healing

Inuit have always been very spiritual people, and when the world they knew was replaced by shame, their entire support system collapsed; it has not yet been replaced properly. We now know the spiritual aspects of Inuit being were replaced by religion that more or less just shamed the people. The missionaries meant well, but they did not address the deep spiritual aspects of the Inuit culture that held the people together as a nation.

I believe the proper spiritual support system would have been in place right away if the missionaries did not try to pass on only religious acts. Religion is not from the God that the Inuit were calling *Takpingna*. There is a great big difference between being religious and believing in the almighty Holy Spirit, and He is what Inuit called *Takpingna*, without knowing his name. I believe if the Inuit were able to maintain the almighty spirit in a proper way, their own way, they would have continued to be spiritual in a different, easier and healthier way, right from the

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beginning. They would have a very strong support system in place today, and no one would be addicted to drugs and alcohol. People would still be living in harmony as their ancestors did for many years without the help of outsiders. They would not have just become religious and ashamed of whom they were. They would not have been asked to condemn many of their ways, and even Inuit language would be flourishing today. The Inuit of today would be able to live a life with pride in who they were created to be, as much as anyone else in a free country that has not known the impact of colonization.

Conclusion

Harold Napoleon (1996) states,

Yes, the Congress and the American people can help the Eskimos, Aleuts, and Indians to become free, self-supporting Americans but they must realize that Native people can only do this in their own way, as Eskimos, Aleuts and Indians. To continue to assimilate them, to continue to keep them as pets unable to care for themselves, to continue to attempt to remake them into anything else but what they are, is to commit slow cultural genocide.

(p. 32)

I believe the Inuit of Canada agree with Harold Napoleon (1996) when he says that Inuit “we are, press on together –not alone– free of the past that haunted and disabled us, free of the ghosts that haunted our hearts, free to become what we were intended to be by God” (p. 28).

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