

# The need to ‘belong’: social connectedness and spatial attachment in Polar Eskimo settlements

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**ABSTRACT.** Climate and environmental change places a variety of different pressures on remote, indigenous Arctic communities. The sea ice is the platform on which the Inugguit culture of northwest Greenland is based and thus it is inevitable that its retreat will have implications for the indigenous notion of place and for the manner in which the Inugguit articulate their sense of belonging with respect to the natural environment. With the demise of storytelling, the traditional vehicle for knowledge transmission, and the squeeze on hunting by consumer society and the Greenland Self Rule imposed quota system, it is apparent that some younger people are now engaging with more western ontologies of place. The relationship between man and nature is for some beginning to be expressed in terms of detachment and not extension. Whilst the way the Inugguit relate to their immediate natural environment might be in flux, other social practices of belonging such as naming and visiting are unchanged and still characterise these communities. In northwest Greenland, the need to ‘belong’ remains the social imperative that it has always been and the mechanisms used to reinforce this remain intact.

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## Introduction

In certain remote hunter-gatherer communities affected by climate change, indigenous notions of place and the hunters’ relationship to the local cosmos are likely to be reconfigured as dramatic changes occur in their natural environment. This article explores some of these issues with respect to the question of ‘belonging’ in the sense of social inclusion and ‘interpersonal attachments’ (Baumeister and Leary 1995: 522), and in the way one relates to, and corresponds with, the immediate natural environment through a ‘sense of experience and phenomenology of locality’ (Lovell 1998: 1). The basis for these observations is 12 months ethnographic fieldwork in northwest Greenland.

In very remote Inuit communities such as those of northwest Greenland, pseudo-subsistence hunting represents still a tightly intertwined human environmental system in which indigenous people interact symbiotically with an ecosystem upon which some still depend for their way of life. Affected by dramatic social change over the last 50 years and recent climatic change, indigenous ontologies of place in this Arctic community are now at risk of being redefined by new cosmologies.

With the onset of very rapid climate change since the late 1980s, the Inugguit sense of place and their need to form associations with their environment has begun to mutate, suggesting that the two inter-related themes of place and belonging might be reassessed in the future as new identity paradigms are formed by the younger generation. With the disappearing sea ice, ‘experienced’ space is shrinking and this is reflected in new mindsets, the product of a more urban, sedentary life style. Indigenous conceptions of place and environment are beginning to be revised as the remnants of animist and spiritual beliefs disappear completely, the transmission of stories dies out and as the sea ice struggles to form.

The young people of northwest Greenland have today a fraction of the knowledge of the older hunters and the mnemonic landscapes of the older hunters’ stories are losing their narrative significance: a sensuous world is being replaced by a Cartesian cosmology of empty objects as the space is no longer ‘lived’ in the same way. For the older people, a mountain is not just a mountain, but is a confluence of historical events tracing their previous peripatetic lifestyle. Even if their stories’ principal function is a ‘humanising’ one (Willerslev 2007: 172), knowledge is passed on through *hiku* (‘sea-ice’)-based stories. Without the sea ice, the stories would lose their essence as the journey to the places where the ‘storied’ events took place would be a different one (by boat) and thus the experience would not be the same. Disappearing sea ice will inevitably result in cultural shift because the sea ice is so fundamental to the Inugguit way of living and always has been.

Despite extreme isolation over an extended period of time and despite living in an age of globalisation, the Inugguit of northwest Greenland have a tendency not to look at the outside world for contact or future cooperation of any kind. Instead, they are more concerned with maintaining what one might call their own dense ‘networks of belonging’. By a ‘network of belonging’, it is meant a network with a few nodes representing branches of an extended family (typically) that constantly reassert their kin links with one another through various modalities and practices of social belonging. These include intensive visiting and various other mechanisms such as naming, *kaffimiks* (celebratory get-togethers at which coffee and cakes (as well as savoury food) are served) and the toasting of shared years of birth. To not belong in such a community is akin to committing a form of social suicide, and is avoided at all costs. It is likely that this has always been the case, and it remains so today.

The geography of Greenland is conducive to what one can call unique networks of belonging because places are 'bounded'. Unlike any other country in the world, this peculiar topography enforces certain patterns of intensive community interaction because it is relatively difficult to leave these thinly populated settlements. On the largest island on earth, 55,000 people live dotted around the edge in small, unconnected towns and settlements. In the more remote, road-less settlements of northwest Greenland, all of which are skirted by the Greenland Ice Sheet which covers over 80% of the country, the only way out is either what is for many the unaffordable weekly helicopter, dog sledge providing there is sea ice or in the months of July and August, a small motor boat. For Savissivik, a settlement of 40 hunter-gatherers at the southern most tip of the region that the Inugguit occupy, none of these options are often available: storms in the winter months prevent a helicopter landing for weeks on end, the thinning sea ice means that it is now too dangerous to negotiate the Cape York archipelago, beyond which lie the other Inugguit settlements and it is for most people too far from the other settlements to travel by motor boat.

With backs to the Greenland Ice Sheet where nothing lives, this community comprises a small cluster of houses facing the sea. Once the sea has frozen over, it rapidly becomes their highway. With it taking longer and longer for the sea ice to form, these networks of belonging can become especially dense through intensive visiting at certain points of the year when it is difficult to leave and there is little else to do. It used to only take a matter of weeks for the sea ice to form to the point that one could run a dog-sledge on it. Now, with the warming climate and strong winds, there is a period of potentially months when the hunters are unable to go out on the sea ice because it is too thin, but cannot hunt from motor boats either because there is too much ice in the water. During this inactive period, hunters can only sit at home and wait, repairing sledges, tools and clothing. Ironically, for this modern age of mass movement, the Inugguit in the remote settlements such as Savissivik are, with the thinning sea ice, becoming actually more remote and isolated than ever before. Typically, the sea ice now starts to form in September, but it might not be thick enough to travel on by dog-sledge until December/January time when it is dark 24 hours a day.

### The Inugguit

The Inugguit (singular: Inugguaq) live in the most northern permanently inhabited indigenous settlement in the world, just 800 miles from the North Pole. They are a sub-group of the Inuit, their self-imposed demonym meaning the 'big people'. This community of 770 spread across four different settlements occupy an area the size of Germany. A significant proportion of the population had travelled in various waves of migration, the last of which was in the nineteenth century, across the Smith Sound from Baffin and Ellesmere Islands in

Canada to Greenland (probably for hunting reasons). The Inugguit were semi-nomadic up until the 1950s. They used to move continuously between fourteen different camps, in pursuit of the animals they hunt. Today, this is one of the last pseudo-hunter-gatherer communities left in Greenland, but only a minority of the population live from hunting alone. Most of the hunting is sea mammal based, but not exclusively so. Culturally and linguistically, they are closer to the Canadian Inuit of the northern part of Baffin Island than anybody else. Trips to Arctic Canada by dog-sledge to visit relatives were frequent up until the late 1980s when the climate began to change dramatically. Now, it is no longer possible as there is open water between Canada and Greenland all year round. Climate change has meant that the Inugguit have become cut off from their Canadian relatives.

Prior to having a superstructure of a Danish welfare benefit system imposed on them in the 1950s, the Inugguit, or Polar Eskimos as Knud Rasmussen called them, were living in an acephalous, non-tribal communistic anarchy that operated to maintain social control and resolve conflict, but where there was no political leadership. Social organisation was very loose: orders were not given, only suggestions were made by the shaman. If any social hierarchy existed at all, it related only to the hunters and was based on pure hunting ability. Inuit kinship is bilateral (Nuttall 1992: 81): relatives on both the father's and mother's side are seen as belonging to one's own kin group, and social solidarities are embedded to a large extent within family and kinship groups. Many households consist of an extended family with three generations living in one house. Adoption of children is very common. It is only within the extended family that leadership is effectively exercised. Each household is related by kinship to a certain number of other households established in the same settlement (Nuttall 1992: 82), and the 'closeness between these households contrasts with the social distance between households that belong to different kin groups' (Briggs 1970: 77). It is principally within these groups of related families that game is shared, visiting occurs, and various domestic services are rendered. Marriage is based on a strict division of labour, and space is therefore gendered to some degree.

### What it means to belong (or not to belong)

Merleau-Ponty (2002: 530) in the last line of *Phenomenology of perception* says: 'Man is but a network of relationships, and these alone matter to him'. The desire to belong is universal. The idea of belonging is central to the notion of how we give meaning to our lives. Our sense of identity is based on our interactions with the people that surround us through shared beliefs, traditions and language. Belonging is about belonging to a particular group of individuals. We define ourselves to a large extent by the communities we belong to. In small, homogenous societies in very remote locations, the parameters of belonging are so well defined that to be an

outsider in some way may even be dangerous and will soon lead to gossip. Social life is governed by a rigid, unwritten code.

The need to 'belong' is undoubtedly compelling in all societies. Erich Fromm (2004: 17) says that the reason for this is our subjective self-consciousness, the faculty of thinking by which man is aware of himself as an individual entity, different from nature and other people. Fromm believes that unless man 'belongs' somewhere, he feels as if he is overcome by individual insignificance. Fromm thinks that there is a human imperative to avoid isolation and moral aloneness. The Inuguit are in agreement with this. To be without a wife for instance is the greatest misfortune that can befall the Arctic hunter.

The process of the emergence of the individual from his original ties, a process which Fromm calls 'individuation' seems to have barely begun amongst the Inuguit. If he has gone through the process of 'individuation', this might mean that he has been rejected from society for there is little space for 'individuals' in a society that historically has only managed to survive by sharing and working together.

In Inuguit society, identity with family and kin provides much needed security. The objective in such a society is to be rooted in a structuralised whole in which one has an unquestionable place. This whole is the meaning of life. Being a part of this social order gives the Inuguit the feeling of belonging and security. If this place becomes questioned (perhaps because of some activity), his ontological security is in doubt. To suffer aloneness (when in society) is surely one of the worst outcomes for an Inuguit who craves constant company. Up until recently, marriage was an economic necessity and if one were not married, life would have been exceptionally tough. If one becomes alienated in an Inuit settlement, one requires an exit strategy, normally moving to another settlement or suicide. Cases of both were witnessed during my stay in the Polar North.

Jackson (1995: 1) starts his memoir by saying that 'ours is a century of uprootedness'. Despite living in the age of up-rootedness, we all need to belong *somewhere*. The issue of 'belonging' became a perennial struggle during my stay in the community. It was impossible for me to ignore because my day-to-day experience was framed in these terms. But my distinct impression was in fact that in the settlements in which I worked, everybody was engaged in the search for belonging, and not just the outsider. 'Belonging' was a social imperative. To belong is to be part of the collective consciousness that defines the community which is the permanent and perpetual condition of things.

Social (or familial) connectedness and spatial attachment converge in the notion of 'belonging' which is inherently tied to identity and the differentiation between 'us' and 'them'. The Inuguit sense of belonging is composed of an affinity to the local cosmos *and* 'membership' of the community. Active membership and participation in the environment is the experience of place and culture.

This rootedness in their surroundings creates an existential framework which governs large parts of their lives and their overall philosophy. The Inuguit belong to the landscape around them more than it belongs to them. It is not a relationship expressed in terms of ownership and certainly not in terms of personal ownership. Personal ownership extends to clothing, but not much else. For all of us 'places nurture a feeling of belonging' (Nuttall 1992: 40), but place identity for the Inuguit does not mean belonging to a specific settlement. The sense of 'belonging' is anchored to the *nuna* (for the occasional one with political ambitions, the *nuna inuguit*) and the shared experience of hunting. A small group of Inuguit spoke semi-jestingly of wishing to be one day independent of Greenland and form their own state, *nuna inuguit*.

There is a deep communal bond with the natural environment, but to be part of that bond you have to be born into it or earn it. The bond can be broken, and once it is broken it is difficult to mend. As sworn to me by a number of Inuguit, the bond is so strong that one should not leave the place for the long term. If one does so, one is severing a more fundamental, irreversible bond to the *nuna*, and the result is that one might not be accepted back when one tries to return. *Nuna* is more than the land. It is the surrounding physical and spiritual environment including the sea ice, the mountains, the air, the animals, fish and even souls and memories of events and people who lived in the past. Its associations are both spiritual and physical and the nature of the bond reflects this. There is an intimacy with the *nuna* ('the local cosmos, the *total habitat*'). Implicit in *nuna* is a strong sense of the inter-connectedness of human and natural communities and great pride is taken in this primordial relationship with nature.

It is the spiritual value of the *nuna* which their ancestors have occupied. It is something that has been shared and passed down. This identity is also socially constructed through the identification of certain characteristics seen as particular to that region and embedded in the *nuna*. These would include hunting practices (hunting narwhal from kayaks using harpoons), eating of certain traditional foods which are peculiar to the outer settlements (polar bear, narwhal and *kiviat*, 'fermented little auk', in particular) and of course their language whose aberrant phonology makes it inaccessible to most Greenlanders. Eating this food is a way of reinforcing the oneness of the group and the sense of relatedness, connecting oneself historically to a specific cultural landscape inhabited by one's forefathers and to the shared culture of hunting. Hunters share game amongst one another according to complex rules depending on the hunter's level of involvement in the catch. No hunter is left without in a society where there is a clear disdain for unshared, individual wealth. The Inuguit subscribe to an egalitarian ideology and are reluctant to make moral judgements on other people that might be seen as individual criticisms.

Belonging has an important social dimension too, and is even arguably the basis for the penitentiary system. In terms of crime, there are detention centres in the capital where inmates are tagged, but have almost complete liberty, holding the keys to their cells. Thus far, there has been no established prison-like penitentiary system in Greenland. The Inuit have a fear of incarceration and the system represents instead something resembling the model of punishment in medieval Iceland. The punishment for a serious crime might be exile to another settlement where one is given a job, a place to live, but where one is importantly an 'outsider' and where one's status is known to everyone. The peculiar topography of Greenland enables the system of exile to act as a *bona fide* punishment in a place where the links to the local community and the local cosmos are of paramount importance. There are many stories in Greenland of murderers fleeing from the scene of the crime towards the ice sheet behind the settlement. Knowing that the criminal cannot survive in this hostile wilderness, the police take no action. He dies in the wild, or more typically returns to the settlement where he is arrested.

The distress of detachment from place and family, of severing the network of belonging is sufficiently strong that exile in itself is considered an onerous punishment. Some of the smaller settlements such as Siorapaluk have refused to accept these criminal exiles because of the problems they impose on tiny communities. In many respects, the Inugguit perceived my stay in the Polar North as a sort of exile. Such a voluntary detachment of kin, albeit a temporary one, would have been intolerable for them. Throughout my stay I was continuously asked if I was feeling homesick, *angir'dlarhiqtutin?* Young people would tell me that they could never leave their homeland. Their sense of belonging is related to a sense of place that has been internalised, intertwined with hunting practice. It is common to return to their birth-place to die, underlying the sense of continuity between personhood and land. This special, spiritual bond and loyalty to land and place, which for many of us is so alien, is felt at all ages. Those that do leave, tend to return early because of homesickness. Through networks reaffirming belonging and through the culture of hunting on the ice, the Inugguit have created a fixed, non-negotiable identity for themselves that only now might begin to be tested.

It does not matter much how well one speaks the language, what one eats and what kind of house one lives in, one cannot *really* belong unless one can boast the right kin relations and genealogies. Those most likely to commit suicide are those who might feel they have become 'outsiders', when a network has been fractured, perhaps because a personal relationship has broken down. Belonging can connect, but also exclude. Previously, if one were an 'outsider', one might become a *qivittoq*. A *qivittoq* is a mysterious, supernatural wanderer who has been perhaps shamed or rejected by the community and leaves the settlement for the wilderness, unable to live any longer in society. In a recent school exam in

Qaanaaq (northwest Greenland), teenagers were asked to write an essay on 'why there were no more *qivittoq* in Greenland'. Almost every student said the reason was that people had learnt to commit suicide. It is significant that the word for 'commits suicide' *imminortoq* refers to somebody 'who goes away from home' (and thus breaks the bond of belonging).

### Visiting as a practice of belonging

Modalities of 'belonging' are practiced through various mechanisms, but principally through networks of *pulaar*. The word *pulaar* means 'visit', and the Inugguit spend their days going from one hut to another, sometimes visiting the same family member four or five times in the same day, even if there is absolutely nothing to say, no news, no gossip. The *pulaar* is the most defining social institution in this part of the Arctic and in the smaller settlements this intensive socialising can become overwhelming. The smaller the place, the stricter are the parameters of belonging, the more suffocating these reaffirmations of belonging can become. The important point to remember about these visits is that there is no point to them, other than the objective of co-presence which is essential and underpins Inugguit social organisation. In particular, there is a need for very regular face-to-face contact between members of bilaterally extended families where there is a high degree of mutual assistance and which are the cultural and social units of productions.

These visits are a means of exchanging gossip and news, but often in the smallest of settlements, there is little of importance to report and never enough material to cover three or four visits from the same person in one day alone. The Inugguit are the ultimate social beings, and many live in fear of being alone. The number of visits an outsider receives is the barometer for how well his efforts at integrating into the community are succeeding.

Shortly after arriving in the community, men would enter the house (without knocking, only *kadluma* ('white Europeans') knock), sit down, smile and grin. Initially, the very shy Inugguit can be circumspect about contact with strangers. For the most part, they wanted nothing. They just wanted company, even if that meant not saying anything for what seemed like intolerably long periods of time. Conversation turned invariably at some point to kinship and the complex familial genealogies that are recited to the visitor in great detail. The mutual familiarity and inter-connectedness is a matter of pride. By making kinship the key subject matter for conversation, the sense of relatedness is constantly reinforced and the need to be part of this familial web is overwhelming.

Integrated into their landscape, listening and silence have traditionally been essential to the Inuit and any visit was likely to include long periods of silence. A visit might last for anything from a few minutes to several hours. Houses are left open and visitors come and go all day long. It would be frowned upon to lock a door and might suggest a lack of trust on the behalf of the

occupant. A locked door during the day would normally imply sexual activity or a serious drinking bout was taking place in the home. By locking the door, one risks one's social reputation. Initially, the protocol and the mechanics of these visits were difficult to determine. It was easy to make the mistake of waiting for an invitation to 'visit' people; of not reciprocating the 'visit'; and of committing minor cultural *faux-pas* such as knocking on the door, forgetting not to light a candle when somebody visits, not having pre-prepared coffee in a thermos, asking direct questions etc. I was coeval with the Inuit lifeworld I inhabited, but the exchanges, reciprocities and interdependencies were sometimes misunderstood.

I was curious to know how I would fit into this entangled web of visits. Researchers are not always welcome and have a poor reputation in the community. Not being related to anybody or having any 'sponsors' to whom I could fall back on, and being most obviously an 'outsider', I did not have a clear peer group. Typically, it was the children that came to visit who had sometimes been sent by their parents to spy on the outsider. Others that came to visit were the *angutsuduk* ('bachelors'), some of whom did not for various reasons belong properly to an extended network of visits. Not having a wife and children is socially frowned upon, stigmatized and the subject of endless jokes. The single men are single for a reason. Whilst it was taboo to discuss it, the reason they did not have a wife would have been known to everyone. In the case of those that visited me, some had previously wives who had left them due to domestic abuse, some suffered from schizophrenia or minor mental illness, others were criminal exiles and one just had severe learning difficulties.

In the settlement of Savissivik, social integration took on a fascinating dynamic as out of the 40 inhabitants, no fewer than 16 were bachelors, and thus the number of visitors one would receive on some days reached absurd proportions. As an *angutsuduk*, these bachelors had become my peer group and my network of belonging. Unsurprisingly, many of these visits were characterised by the ribald Inuguit sense of humour, but much of the time was simply spent discussing who had been visiting whom.

It is in these most remote Inuguit communities with one cultural setting where there is a particularly strong tendency for people to monitor each others' sociability. Close observation of each others' behaviour is facilitated by the spatial arrangement of houses dotted around the shore. Movement in such a place is recorded and reported first hand, or more commonly second or third hand in encounters in subsequent days. All the houses face the frozen sea and thus these visits are in public view and one is seldom granted privacy of any kind. With binoculars sitting on every window sill and with 24 hour daylight for four months of the year, any form of clandestine socialising would be more or less impossible in this treeless environment. It is in this context that a small, but intense social world develops fuelled by incessant gossip

often insinuating sexual relations between local people, obscene jokes and ridicule. The Inuguit take comfort in the localness and total familiarity of their lifeworld where everybody knows everything about his neighbour.

The existence of the Savissivik community itself is very uncertain: many locals think that it will be closed down within ten years as young people leave the settlement for the facilities of the town, Qaanaaq. When the outer settlements close down, a form of urbanisation takes place and inevitably the way people relate to the land and surrounding people changes with it as their interaction is less immediate and the need to belong is less of an imperative. Many young people in Qaanaaq see no reason at all to go out on the sea ice for example, the physical platform for the culture of the Inuguit. Practices of belonging continue but in a less intense way.

The dynamic of social movement and interconnectedness is quite different in another settlement, Siorapaluk, the northern most permanently inhabited, indigenous settlement in the world. Here, there are just two families and one bachelor. He lived in a tiny hut without electricity, and was known as *hiuliqatuk* that refers to 'somebody who likes to live as in the olden days'. In this closed, inward-looking community, there is no space for an outsider at all and it would be difficult to imagine more dense social networks of belonging than in these settlements. The options for visiting are no more than a handful of households, all of whom represent two extended families.

People are consistently and directly dependent on one another. Historically, one could not survive in isolation in such a hostile climate. Thus, the personalities and behaviour of the people living in the settlements in particular are important to their own interpersonal lives and as communitywide concerns. Locally criticised emotions such as anger and jealousy which play an important role in Inuit society, are negative 'emotions of place'. They are sentiments that people do not want strongly associated with the local environment (but that is not to say that they are not). Evaluations of others' emotional dispositions are assessments of others' positions in societal space, of others' connectedness to the community. Those who are not 'accepted' into the settlement communities would normally leave. Others who had left the community and tried to move back many years later were not accepted. This is especially true, if the individual has lived in Nuuk or overseas for a sustained period of time. There is a sense that the individual will lose his Greenlandicness, and no longer be one of them on his return.

Life in the settlements is characterised by this very small scale of life, constantly reaffirming family interconnectedness through a discourse of kinship and relatedness. The social ingredients of life in the settlements are collectivity, solidarity, hunting culture, eating of sea mammals, a pseudo-subsistence way of life and proximity to nature. This is a place where one might expect to encounter a strong sense of belonging, but perhaps not the apparent need to reaffirm it. To be alone and

not surrounded by children is for the Inuguaq 'not to belong' and constitutes the worst possible scenario. It might either arouse suspicion or feelings of sympathy.

If one is not part of the kinship network, the barriers of 'belonging' can be insurmountable. The Inuguit have forged an exclusive identity for themselves. People were introduced to me by the kinship term, more often than by name. Rather than building a mental registry of names, one is invited instead to formulate complex networks of relations in one's mind. Communal and familial identity precedes any sense of individual identity. Those who were not originally from northwest Greenland were highlighted in discussions. There was also a distinction between those who could claim a Canadian (Baffin Island) heritage, and those who could not. In terms of cultural identity, the Inuguit looked to their Canadian ancestors more than other Greenlanders. A significant minority could trace their ancestry back to the nineteenth century wave of immigration from the Baffin Island region. Many still have family there, and some would proudly have a small Nunavut flag on top of their television.

#### Other modalities of belonging and place

Belonging is forged through the reaffirmation of almost impenetrably dense networks of kin relations and through the constant use of kinship terms where one might expect to hear a personal name. Relationships between one another are constantly articulated for the benefit of the outsider, the repetition reinforcing the connection and relatedness. The Inuguit are proud of this high degree of relatedness, and like to boast of it on public occasions.

To an outsider, the use of some of these kinship terms can be quite puzzling, such as when a boy is named after a dead relative, another means of maintaining the continuity of the sense of belonging, but this time between the living and the dead, the people and the *nuna* where the deceased are buried. The name (*ateq*) is the most important cultural identity marker of the Inuit, connecting the *inuk* to ancestors, and the cycles of the living and the dead (Bodenhorn 2006: 139–157). The *ateq* is closely linked to the issue of 'belonging'. It is clear from every encounter that the *ateq* has a very special significance in this society. It is believed that a child does not become a person until he or she receives a name. The name is the link to the soul (*tarneq*) (Alia 2007: 21) and the namesake name can be recycled lots of different times, creating lots of different embodiments of the same ancestor. As Alia (2007: 35) explains, the naming procedure is part of the grieving process and creates a whole new web of bonds when a mother embraces her child and calls her 'mother' or when a child gets a new sibling because the new born child is the embodiment of the ancestor who was the sister of the girl the other girl is named after. To an outsider, the complexity of these kin relations which are as much socio-cultural as they are biological, can

be rather challenging especially so as the link between name-soul and identity is so intimate that new names seldom develop. In addition to the recycling of names and multiple usage of kinship terms which conjure up previous socialities, the Inuguit tend to have six names and will frequently use them. Danish teachers at the school in Qaanaaq would frequently have problems identifying exam candidates because they would use different names on their scripts.

These other names bring with them another bundle of complex relationships and this is before one considers the issue of descriptive nicknames which the majority of people have. These names aside, if the *ateq* is not passed on, the soul wanders around with nowhere to rest. It is taboo to mention the name of a dead person until the name has been recycled. Name avoidance rules are strong as I discovered subsequently when there were suicides in the town.

Being the embodiment of the dead ancestor, the boy not only assumes the name of the deceased, but also the kinship term so that for example his father will refer to his son as 'father' if his son is named after his paternal grandfather. In turn, the child will call his father 'son'. There are about six families in Qaanaaq, each with its own personality, and the kinship ties are enforced, and even exaggerated, through the use of a micro-system of kinship terms in which first cousins of the opposite sex refer to each other as 'younger brother, older sister' etc., and male second cousins once removed are called 'paternal or maternal uncles'.

Amongst the Inuguit, there is a pronounced need for a collective ontological security. This is expressed through a system of genealogical reaffirmations of belonging, but also through a shared holistic philosophy. Without this, the Inuguit would believe that their lives would become desperate and meaningless. The framework for this ontological security is of course the dense family network. During my time, I discovered that each family network had its own, separate identity, characteristics and personalities. The Dunneqs were considered aggressive and confrontational, the Qujaukitsoqs were outgoing, friendly and proud, the Qaerngaqs were thought to be philosophical, introspective etc.

All these kin, and in smaller settlements the entire community, would come together at a birthday *kaffimik* celebration irrespective of whether the person celebrating his or her birthday was present or not. Following a strict protocol of seating, food, order of eating, length of stay etc., a *kaffimik* is a chance for everybody to come together to celebrate the name of the person celebrating his or her birthday. A variety of traditional Greenlandic food is eaten, typically sitting on the floor, before visitors move to the other end of the room where they will be seated, drink coffee and eat Danish cakes. As with so many aspects of life in Greenland, this is another example of how modernity meets tradition. Those who share a name have special namesake relationships, creating a special bond between these two people.

One cannot consider 'belonging' in such small, well-defined communities without considering its interaction with the notion of place because place is a set of spaces converted into meaningful locations through people's ideas and experiences with them. In recent years, there has been much written on the 'sense of place' as socio-spatial interrelations change in the context of globalisation (Massey 1994; Gillian 1995: 87–132). Place implies a sense of 'attachment': an amalgam of social and cultural interactions and associations. Conceptions of place and indeed nature are socially constructed in accordance with local ontologies, and through daily spatial activities of people (De Certeau 1984). The ontology of an existential man-nature enmeshment or intertwining is characteristic of the Inuguit. The use of the word, *hila*, meaning consciousness, mind and weather is indicative of this refusal to separate mind and nature. For the *inuk*, the natural environment is an extension of the human mind. When the weather was bad *hila naammangitsoq* which in their terms typically meant when there was mist, fog (*pujoq*) or low-dense cloud giving a feeling of oppression or closeness, people would often complain of head-aches. On more than one occasion, I was advised not to visit people during periods of bad weather because people might be feeling depressed or not well. For the Inuguit, the conceptual distance between nature and humanity is in fact very narrow and the environmental crisis is a philosophical crisis. Their mindset is a challenge to the anthropocentrism of the west, and questions the supposed moral superiority of human beings over other species on the planet.

The natural environment or *pingortitaqaaq*, literally the 'nature that has been created' determines mindset and thinking. When I was living in Siorapaluk, the northern most permanently inhabited settlement in the world with a population of 59, I spent many an afternoon chatting to a Japanese man who had come to northwest Greenland as part of a scientific expedition forty years ago. Ikua Oshima was in his twenties at the time and he decided there and then not to return to his homeland, choosing instead the life of an Arctic hunter. One afternoon, he came round with a gift of some fresh musk-oxen meat and over a cup of coffee, I asked him why he chose to stay. He looked out of the window, eyes fixed on his dog team skulking on the sea ice and after an unfeasibly long silence, Ikua uttered one word with a great sense of purpose, *ihumaninahorjamahunga*. The word 'ihuma' means thought and the expression would have to be translated as 'I wanted my mind to be open to thoughts'. In his view, the Arctic wilderness offered the best means of keeping one's mind open. Other people made similar statements. By belonging to the landscape, one can hope to obtain a clarity of vision and a sense of harmony.

In modern times, the Inuguit have become a displaced people, forcefully relocated from their ancestral home in Dundas (Ummannaq) to make way for the construction of a top secret US Air Base in 1953 at

Thule or Pituffik. The land and rich hunting grounds that they knew intimately, the land where their ancestors are buried had become 'forbidden land' to which they were not able to return. The area was transformed into the most technologically advanced, 'Star Wars' like ballistic missile early warning system (BMEWS) in the world. The move meant that the crucial bond of 'belonging' with both the ancestral land and the kin that lie beneath the land was severed. Qaanaaq, the hunting camp they moved to in 1953, is still today a metaphor of dislocation for the elderly residents.

Historically, this has been a community of story-tellers and their stories represent another modality of belonging, tying the phenomenon with that of place. The stories tend to be *hiku*-centric. In these stories, the *hiku* or sea ice represents travel and mobility. It is a connective, geographic entity that reconnects kin in the settlements. In the recorded Inuit lunar calendar, the formation of the sea ice is known as *tuhartuut* ('hearing news from other camps'): a time in which the sea ice is solid enough to permit travel and enable people to visit relatives in other camps. The *hiku* is the platform for their hunting culture. Sea ice features are associated in the collective and individual memories of most Inuguit. Trails on the sea ice are similar to land trails in their remarkable historical continuity. They usually follow similar courses along or across seasonal ice features, avoiding recurrent dangerous spots, and aiming at precise destinations. The *hiku* enlarges the Inuguit territory and offers access to essential dietary resources for the community.

It is clear that the Inuguit feel strongly that *hiku* is their domain and not that of the *kadluna*. They are convinced that the *kadluna* cannot survive out in the wilderness, in the domain of their social space. They firmly believe that only the Inuguit can survive in their environment. Their sense of place has a proprietorial exclusivity to it that has been fostered over the course of centuries in a climate more hostile than today, in an age when survival was the only concern.

The telling of stories takes you to a wide variety of places as the Inuguit have always lived in a wide horizon of movement and belonging: old hunting grounds, now abandoned settlements, the icy wilderness. For narrated events always happen somewhere. And for an oral culture, that location is never merely incidental to those occurrences. The events belong, as it were, to the place, and to tell the story of those events is to let the place itself speak through the telling. The landscape for the Arctic hunters is mnemonic, a trigger for the telling and preservation of the stories, and memory is a way of articulating the relationship between community and landscape. They show how extended family connections are foundational to life in the region, and are records of prodigious memories and social history. They describe how families and ancestors have belonged to the *nuna*.

The Inuguit place-names are absent from most maps, but complex mental maps with indigenous, local names

are stored in their minds. The Inuguit did not traditionally use maps to represent their territory. Some of these indigenous place-names are being forgotten because it is no longer possible to hunt in some of the former hunting grounds due to the *imaq* or open-water. Inuguit place names often inform you of land and sea use. So, *qammavik* means the 'place where hunters lie in wait for sea mammals' or *ukalerhalik* 'a place where one finds Arctic Hares'. As Keith Basso (1996: 47) says 'place names are important in storytelling because they are situating devices, as conventionalised instruments for locating narrated events in the physical settings where the events have occurred'. The proper name and the geographical feature or clues to hunting merge in the consciousness of the people. In a seminal article, Tuan (1991: 684–96) discusses the role of language in place-making.

Over the last three decades, the storytelling transmission process has, however, begun to break down for the first time and the spoken forms and traditions by which place-specific knowledge had once been preserved and disseminated are rapidly becoming no longer operative. The disappearance of traditional spoken traditions might have consequences for the relationship between the Inuguit and the notion of 'place'. In this part of the Arctic the primacy of *place* is being forgotten, superseded by a new, more abstract notion of 'space'. The hunters are no longer nomadic, but rooted to a town. As the stories disappear, the land and its particularising stories begins to lose its multiplicitous power. The human senses are no longer as gripped and fascinated by the expressive shapes and sounds of particular places. If place-names are forgotten, the social experience of the shared existential space is lost and the landscape returns to a blank environment.

Place-based, vernacular culture of face-to-face storytelling is now being replaced by the automated video game where the interaction is with a consol. The result is that some young people are losing the pulse of the place and are becoming impervious to the sensuous world. Young people's conceptualisations of space are expanding in size, but diminishing in depth and detail. Horizons of knowledge are diminishing. For those with a lack of consciousness of local history and culture, the land is becoming less of an animate, expressive power.

The sense of geographic embeddedness and collective memory of place that was passed on through stories is fading. Place-names are focal points of human attachment, often providing clues to what can be hunted there. In any one locality, an individual is surrounded by a relational network of marked places that identify potential resources, stored supplies, stories and historical events in the record of the land. Place-names can become active agents of identity, creating contextualised feelings of 'attachment'. The loss of storytelling may have implications for the very strong sense of 'belonging' to be found in this corner of the Arctic. From the stories, one can infer that for the Inuguit, land and kinship are the

most important attachment points for memory. Stories manifest different modalities of belonging, tying families together and reaffirming kin relations and genealogies in complex ways through narrative accounts.

### Conclusion

In the relational culture of the Inuguit, persons are defined by their relationships to one another. The Inuguit do not assign ontological primacy to the individual, but to the group. Existence for them is ostensibly relational. Despite the very significant changes that have impacted the community - the demise of hunting, the disappearance of the semi-nomadic lifestyle, the effects of encroaching globalisation, the local urbanisation - the Inuguit still engage in the same practices of belonging. The animist beliefs have for the most part been lost, but those traditional beliefs that are conducive to a sense of belonging such as the use and recycling of names are still upheld. A sense of belonging is not reinforced by collective rituals, but naming remains an essential part of Inuit culture even in regions more subject to the forces of modernity and globalisation than northwest Greenland.

But, belonging is two-dimensional: social (or human) and environmental or cosmic and in terms of the interaction of the dynamic of belonging with the sense of place, it would seem that new paradigms are beginning to form and that old ontologies of place bolstered through the art of storytelling are beginning to diminish. It is not surprising that the Inuguit show such connectedness to the land as most other indigenous peoples who have resided in a particular place for centuries and have been directly dependent on their environment for survival, are likely to have done the same. The way that the Inuguit embed knowledge in stories that are linked to the landscape is not surprising either. However, if hunting dies out altogether because of the lack of sea ice, there will be little need or occasion to activate this knowledge which will ultimately be lost. Knowledge is rooted in place, and having this knowledge or at least being able to tap into it enforces the sense of belonging with the local cosmos. In the light of social and environmental change in northwest Greenland, there is evidence of an indigenous perceptual remodelling of the relationship between man and nature, but the traditional modalities of belonging are hitherto unchanged. Relatedness and belonging are constantly being reaffirmed, and it is this constant reaffirmation through these practices of belonging which creates the requisite social cohesion which this society lives off.

It is significant if this intricate knowledge of the natural environment begins to disappear because this 'nature' as it has been perceived historically by the Inuguit is not something externalised in the way that it is for us (to an extreme degree with special demarcated areas called 'nature reserves', 'national parks' etc.). Nature is not a separate ontological category, but it is part of who they are. The two are seamlessly bound together. This holistic indigenous epistemology is sometimes known



as *inuit qaujimajatuqangit* and is a reference to the Inuit body of traditional knowledge passed on orally and concerned generally with the life and value system of the Inuit. With this loss of knowledge, the Inugguit's own emotional landscape and sense of Self will therefore be impoverished (but perhaps also expanded) in some way. One can see therefore how identity, language and landscape are all drawn together as this sense of 'belonging' is rooted in the *nuna* which is the subject matter of the endangered oral traditions and the extension of the indigenous mind. Identity paradigms are beginning to shift and will presumably transmute further as indigenous ecophilosophies clash with other perspectives on the world. The indigenous philosophy of the Inugguit is akin to Næss' ecosophy (Drengson & Inoue, 1995: 8) which is a philosophy of ecological harmony or equilibrium. The mechanistic Cartesian philosophy of the west has of course a quite different perspective on the human-nature interrelationship. This latter mode of thinking is becoming increasingly familiar to the Inugguit and arguably lends itself more to a sedentary lifestyle in which the level of engagement with the natural environment is much less intensive, where land and people are separated. Many of the Inugguit are now dependent on supplies from the south which must have the effect of slowly distancing them from the concept of their immediate natural environment being their source of provisions.

Bender (2001:7) talks of the 'opposition between a rooted sense of belonging and the alienating forces of modernity'. At a personal level, I felt this very strongly. The Inugguit sense of embeddedness to place was something alien to me because of its spirituality and magnitude of feelings that it aroused. In turn, they could no doubt see that I did not at all have this sense of belonging with the place where I grew up. What it means to belong is what it means to be human and is embedded in the existential experience of living with others. It would be difficult to find a subject more important to the Inugguit than that of belonging to your local community. Historically, the issue of belonging has always come with a sense of imperative for the Inugguit. This community was just 'surviving' up until recent times (1950s approximately) and one can only survive in a group situation. Social exclusion would often result in death, voluntary or otherwise.

Unsurprisingly, these remote Inuit communities have not been 'deterritorialised' (Appadurai 1997: 38), that is the objects, traditions and beliefs that define their culture have not been detached from their physical space. The Inugguit are still very much anchored in their physical environment, even if it is changing very rapidly. There is no immediate threat to their cultural identity. The interaction of modernity and tradition in these 21st century pseudo-hunter-gatherer communities has brought great

social change, but little has changed in the sense of 'belonging'. People still need to belong in the same way that they always have, and use the same mechanisms to reinforce this.

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