

The passing on of traditional stories and tales in Nunavik – A historical summary

Presented here is a short historical summary of the passing on of Inuit cultural heritage and the appearance of writing in Nunavik. The information will hopefully help you guide your students in the creation of their own "Inuit Legend".

Until the arrival of the "White Man" and the subsequent learning of writing, the Inuit were a people of oral tradition and gave speech great importance. Certain words even assumed a magical character, seemingly holding power over the surrounding forces of nature which regulated and dominated the existence of the Inuit, for whom survival widely depended on the food available and the climatic conditions influencing hunting, fishing and gathering.

At that time, the traditional stories, tales, legends, myths and songs were perpetuated orally, notably during the long winter nights. While the purpose of some of these stories was to instruct the children or to inculcate important moral values which needed to be preserved for the benefit of all, other stories were told simply to narrate events relating to a specific hunt or a moment in a particular season. Likewise, while certain myths served to explain the creation of the world and the origins of nature, other tales only aimed to entertain the audience. The Inuit have faith in all these legends because, as they believed then, if a story is conveyed it is because it represents the testimony of an event whose veracity cannot be a matter of doubt, otherwise the story itself would have never existed.

Generally the traditional stories, tales, legends and myths differ from one region of the Arctic to the other, but sometimes they only present variations on the same theme. This is particularly the case in relation to certain legends concerning the origins and creation of the world which seem to have spread throughout the Arctic in a variety of guises; the myth of the goddess of the sea and marine animals (who bear the name of Iqalunappa in Nunavik), or the myth surrounding the appearance of the moon and the sun are two examples. The Inuit repertoire abounds in legends where the human and the animal are closely linked and one can easily metamorphose into the other. In order to preserve and transmit this oral heritage, the Inuit memorised these legends, then recited them following an established structure. If the narrator made a mistake and departed from the story as it was known, the audience quickly made the necessary corrections.

In the year 1700s', the Moravian missionaries introduced writing using the Latin alphabet to Greenland and Labrador for the first time, and Catholic, Protestant and Anglican missionaries gradually begin to do the same everywhere in the Arctic in order to facilitate the conversion of new Inuit believers. Then, in the first half of the 19th century, the Reverend James Evans created a syllabic alphabet to transcribe the Cree language, which was without a writing system until then. A few decades later, around the end of the 1800s, the Reverend Edmund James Peck adapted this syllabic alphabet to Inuktitut, in order to promote the reach of the Bible. The syllabic method then spread throughout the Arctic and became, at the beginning of the 20th century, the written version of Inuktitut. The principle of this syllabic system is relatively simple: each form represents a consonant and the orientation of the form indicates the vowel ("a", "i", "u" or the "ai" combination) accompanying the consonant in question.

Although the Inuit of Greenland, Labrador, Nunavik, Nunavut and Alaska speak the same language, namely Inuktitut, the dialects greatly differ from one place to another. Differences can even be noticed between the villages or coasts of the same region; for example, in Nunavik, the Inuktitut used in the villages on the Hudson Bay contains many phonetic and lexical differences compared to the Inuktitut used on the Ungava coast. Consequently, one can easily understand why the transcription of words and writing can vary from one region to another, despite a common language and alphabet.

Even though, in the past, the Inuit did not seem to feel the need to write, they rapidly adopted this syllabic alphabet and were soon committing their most traditional oral forms, such as songs, poetry and narrative tales, to paper. They then threw themselves into other, more unfamiliar, forms of writing like letters, journals, autobiographies, and novels. Furthermore, numerous non-Inuit tried their hand at transcribing and translating some traditional Inuit stories, myths and tales into their mother tongues. Inuktitut is a polysynthetic, even holophrastic, language where a single word can carry the meaning of a whole sentence. As a result, its syntax and its structure are both very different from the ones of the English or French languages, which can complicate the translation.

It is difficult to judge adequately the quality and style of the diverse texts, translations and transcriptions of the decades that immediately followed the appearance of writing, because they were clearly influenced, even limited, by the author's (Inuit or non-Inuit) knowledge of the language in question, as well as his or her talent as a writer. Likewise, it is difficult to evaluate whether a written piece possesses a proper "Inuit style" or if instead it is the product of the foreign influences at work on the author (once again, either

Inuit or not). However, it would appear that in the beginning the writings are closer to the spoken language but diverge from it thereafter. The style of the first writings is simple and without embellishment, and retains several characteristics of the oral language.

The traditional stories included in the document Tell Me a Story follow this model. Initially transcribed into Inuktitut, and remaining faithful to the oral tales of the narrators, they were then translated into English and into French. These stories, as well as several other legends and myths, have inspired numerous sculptors and artists of the North since the end of the 1940s.

In 1950s Nunavik, a woman named Mitiarjuk Nappaaluk started the writing of what would become the first novel in the Inuit language, « Sanaaq ». The novel originated when the author, who was asked to help a few missionaries learn Inuktitut by setting out on paper, in syllabics, sentences containing as many every day terms as possible, "grew wearied of this type of writing and, letting her imagination overflow, created characters and described their good and misfortune in the seasonal cycle of their activities." (Open translation) Fortunately, the written output of Mitiarjuk Nappaaluk did not stop with « Sanaaq ». Amongst other things, this holder of an Honorary PhD from McGill University and member of the Order of Canada would go on to contribute greatly to the teaching of the Inuit language by creating and writing numerous pedagogical documents in Inuktitut.

Thus, although writing appeared in the North relatively late, the Inuit adapted rapidly to this new mode of 'cultural transmission.' Nowadays, books, newspapers and web sites are all written in Inuktitut, and young people are even writing rap songs in their mother tongue.

Web Links

http://www.inuktitut.org/Nunavik/Exposition.html

http://cours.fss.ulaval.ca/webct/blog/ant17259z1 a/index.php?q=node/181

http://services.bang.gc.ca/sdx/makivik/

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Syllabic Alphabet of Nunavik:

| 4 : a | Δ : i | D : U | ∇ : ai | |
|---------------------|----------|----------------------|----------------------|-------------------|
| < : pa | ∧ : pi | > : pu | V : pai | `:p |
| C : ta | ∩ : ti | O : tu | U : tai | ^c : † |
| ь : ka | P : ki | d : ku | 9 : kai | ь : k |
| L : ga | ↑ : gi | J : gu | ា : gai | ւ : g |
| L : ma | Γ : mi | J : mu | 7 : mai | ٠ : m |
| ₀ : na | σ∶ni | ى : nu | ⊸ : nai | ° : n |
| ጎ : sa | ۲ : si | ط: SU | ነ : sai | `:s |
| | c : li | ا : د | ¬ : lai | ۱: ۲ |
| ৮ : ja | ij : 4 | ₹ : j u | ન : jai | ٠ : j |
| ⟨ : va | ۸ : vi | > : VU | ∜ : vai | ° ∶ ∨ |
| S : ra | ~ : ri | ? : ru | ¬ : rai | ۶ : r |
| ^ډ ь : qa | ۹۶ : qi | ال : dn | ⁵ 9 : qai | ^{чь} : q |
| %l : nga | °Ր : ngi | _ື ປ : ngບ | งา : ngai | ზ : ng |

¹ NAPPAALUK, Mitiarjuk, **Sanaaq**, transliterated and translated from Inuktitut by Bernard Saladin d'Anglure, preface of Bernard Saladin d'Anglure, Stanké International Editions, Paris, 2002, 304 pages. Page 7.