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“We’re Back with Our Ancestors”

Inuit Bowhead Whaling in the Canadian Eastern Arctic

Frédéric B. Laugrand and Jarich G. Oosten

Abstract. – The revival of whaling in the Canadian Arctic in the 1990s is an important feature of the revival of modern Inuit culture. Inuit feel that the resumption of whaling connects them to their ancestors. In this article we explore traditional Inuit perceptions of whaling and their transformations in modern society. We suggest that especially the notion of the whole plays a central part in whaling. We explore connections between whaling and shamanism as well as the role of Christianity in modern whaling. We show that key elements of the modern Inuit whaling such as the collective sharing of the game and the joy and happiness expressed at the catch provide strong cultural continuities with the past. Modern Inuit bowhead hunting is embedded in a cosmological framework involving the whole community and connecting different communities to each other. [*Canada, Inuit, cosmology, whaling, shamanism, sharing, joy*]

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Introduction

Whaling is an old tradition in Inuit culture that was greatly affected by commercial Euro-American whaling. In the Canadian Eastern Arctic commercial whaling started in the 15th and 16th century and became particularly intensive in the 17th and 18th century. In the 19th century whalers employed Inuit hunters to catch whales at their stations but profits gradually began to decline until whaling collapsed (Ross 1975, 1984; Eber 1989).

Today, elders recall how their ancestors used to hunt the whales, but the ritual whaling complex described by Boas for the South Baffin and by Rasmussen for the North Baffin area has largely faded from memory. As Inuit still attach great importance to whaling, now that whales are numerous again in the Arctic waters, the revival of whaling is becoming an important part of the revitalization of Inuit culture.

In this article, we examine the beliefs and customs relating to whaling in the Canadian Eastern Arctic that includes Nunavut and Nunavik regions. We rely on classic ethnographical observations and connect those with Inuit descriptions of contemporary whale hunts. Sometimes we briefly discuss whaling traditions in the Western Arctic because they help us to understand Inuit traditions in the Canadian Eastern Arctic. These discussions, therefore, serve heuristic rather than comparative purposes. We use ethnographic data collected between 1880 and 1930 as well as data provided by various contemporary studies, documents released by Nun-

avut and Federal institutions such as the Bowhead Report (Hay et al. 2000), teaching materials used by the Nunavut Arctic College, and newspaper articles. We first discuss the origins of whales and the sea woman, explore the connection between the whale and shamanism that has been largely overlooked, and finally examine whaling rules and practises in the past as well as in the present. The revival of whaling is often perceived as an empowerment of Inuit or a modern expression of ethnic identity, but our preference is here to focus on Inuit perspectives of whaling. Although contemporary whaling practises differ from those of the past, Inuit hunters see the whale as a source of joy for the whole community. On a theoretical level, we argue that whaling provides a context of encompassment. It connects hunters to their ancestors and unites the community, sharing being an essential value within the Inuit social fabric. The revival of whaling is experienced by Inuit as a privileged occasion of empowerment where the values of hunting take precedence over those of outsiders and organize social relationships through the enjoyment and sharing of the spoils of the hunt.

Origins of Whales and the Sea Woman

In the Canadian Arctic, whales were thought to originate from the fingers of the sea woman. She did not want to marry a human being, so she married a stormy petrel or fulmar. Her father took her away from her husband and when the bird chased them, he threw his daughter into the sea. Franz Boas (1888: 544) reports that when she clung to the boat, her father took a knife and cut off the joints of her fingers. They fell into the sea and were transformed into whales, seals, and bearded seals. These animals are therefore closely associated with the sea woman (see Laugrand and Oosten 2008).

A story collected by Dorothy H. Eber (1989: 125 f.; see also 36 f.) from John Atuat illustrates how the sea woman could retaliate through sea animals, and particularly through whales, if one did not observe the rules. Captain George Cleveland known as Suquortaronik was punished for removing and collecting Inuit skulls from different places. Atuat recalls that he had a serious accident: "While he was following the whale, his boat got hit by the whale's tail and turned over."

In another story collected by Boas (1907: 478), the sea woman punished the famous whaling captain Comer by delaying the recovery of a whale. His employees went to visit a shaman and informed Comer that he "had offended the goddess in the sea

by cutting up caribou-meat on the sea-ice, and by breaking the bones there." But Captain Comer was prepared to respect Inuit customs:

We had done wrong. ... I was told to throw up my hands several times as though throwing things away. After I had done that (which I did) they told me I was allright now and would have good success in the future (Eber 1989: 112f.).

Euro-American whalers were well aware of many Inuit rules pertaining to whaling. They introduced new technologies and styles of hunting and this may have contributed to the decline of many rules pertaining to older forms of Inuit whaling (see Sabo and Sabo 1985). Captain Comer was nicknamed the *angakkuq* (the shaman) because he took photographs (Eber 1989: 111 f.). The nickname may have agreed well with his position as a whaling captain. According to Osuitok Ipeelee of Cape Dorset, the shamans knew where to find the whales. "A shaman wouldn't tell people about his powers, but on a hunt, if a shaman wanted to go in a certain direction, that is where the people would go. The shaman would say: 'That's where the whales are'" (Eber 1989: 37).

Origin of Whale Hunting and Shamanism

The Anglican missionary E. J. Peck who opened a mission in Umanarjuaq presents a text by Qoojesie, one of his first converts in South Baffin Island that connects the origin of shamanism to whale hunting. It consists of an Inuktitut text and a verbatim translation dated from the early 1900s. It relates that a woman was the first one to acquire the art of shamanism by lying down on a mattress. She descended to a land below. Her father made her reappear and she became a shaman herself. Peck relates (see Laugrand, Oosten, and Trudel 2006: 560):

Angakotahanarevohtauk ningeookoulehtomik

She also likewise acquired a conjuration (became a conjuror), one who was getting an oldish woman

sakhonut sakkotahakpuktok agvekoyelerigame

with the hunting implements, [so] she was the one who generally acquired hunting implements as often as she commanded whales to be got

asswela sakhotaliktidlugo agverhtahanukpat

this is so while she had hunting implements, whales were got by the Eskimo

qaumayuâlonarame sakkotahaglune

because she was altogether a fountain of light having acquired implements

perhattakoyerame agverngmik agverktoharîngmut
because she often commanded a getting of whales, as often as a whale was got

innugalakrangmut tussûgeyouvulehpok
by the whole community, now she was quite desired

kisseane peyoutitsingmut nerkiksannik
she alone because, she caused an acquisition of food.

The text connects the origin of shamanism to the acquisition of hunting implements that enabled Inuit to successfully hunt whales.¹ With respect to the South Baffin area Boas (1888: 603) reports, "[a]fter a successful whaling-season, all clothing is discarded near the shore, so that in the deer-hunting season the deer may not be offended."

The fact that the woman in Qoojessie's account is described as a source of light and able to command the whales suggests a close relationship between shamanism, women and whaling. Rasmussen (1929: 188) notes that in the Aivilik area, "During a whale hunt, the women were obliged to wear a head ornament consisting of a white quartzstone, fastened to a strap round the forehead. This was done to show a light for the soul of the whale." Thus the women guided the whale to the land.

The act of lying on the mattress that initiates the whole process immediately evokes the practise that the wives of the hunters had to lie down on their beds, when their husbands were whale hunting and emphasizes the importance of their role in the whale hunts.² Rasmussen (1929: 187) relates:

When a whale has been harpooned, all the women must lie down on the sleeping place with limbs relaxed, and loosen all tight fastenings in their clothes, laces of kamiks, waistband: teqif-iut. Unless this is done, the whales

will run the boat far out to sea, dragging it by the line that is made fast to the harpoon head. All this applies to young women and wives. Old women on the other hand may look on freely at the whaling.

The lying down on a mattress during the whale hunt places a woman in the position of an *angakkuq*. The shaman was traditionally bound during the séance and freed himself of his ties, whereas the other participants had to loosen their belts, laces, fastenings, etc. just as the wives of the hunters in the whale hunt had to do. A metaphorical relation is suggested between the shamanic séance and the whale hunt. Noah Piugaattuk from Iglulik recalled a tradition about a strong man, Tapatai, who went out to harvest a bowhead whale and brought it while on his bed, in his sleep (Hay et al. 2000: 59f.).

Tapatai played a double role, that of a hunter going out to harpoon the whale, and that of a woman lying down on a mattress so the whale will come to the shore. Once the float came into sight, he could get up.

Leah Arnaujaq (1986: 11) who lived in Hudson Bay recalled many details of the whale hunts of the past that are now significant.

The older men and women would go up onto a hill to watch what the whaling boats were doing. When the men were chasing a whale, all the women were told to lie down flat on their backs, all way if necessary. Only when the whale was killed were they told they could sit up again. While we waited for the men to come ashore there were many activities to keep us busy. ... When they all got to the ashore they cut up the muktuk of the whale and everyone tried to get lots of it to take home.

Whales could also be brought in through shamanic objects. Felix Pisuk, from Kangir&liniq, relates that the shaman Taliriktuk once put his *qalugiujait* behind a ship and got a bowhead whale (Kolb and Law 2001: 120f.).

Some *tuurngait* were thought to provide whales. Peck reports that the helping spirit Angmaniq gives "whales in answer to the conjuror's invocations" (Laugrand, Oosten, and Trudel 2006: 607) and the helping spirit Qilialik is supposed to hide the souls of whales so they can be easily killed (615). Whales are not very prominent as helping spirits. Peck lists a few whales as *tuurngait* and one of the *tuurngait* of the Nattilik *angakkuq* Iksivalitak is described as a killer whale, white and very big (see Balikci 1970: 204).

In the shamanic language, a whale known as *arviq* in the ordinary language is called *taakslaingiq*, "the one that should not be mentioned" (Rasmussen 1930: 70). As in the case of the sea woman often called "the one down there" (Rasmussen 1929:

1 Interestingly, hunting implements for whaling had a special status in the Western Arctic since they had to be destroyed at the end of the whaling season, including the skins of the boats and all gear equipment (Rasmussen 1927: 312–315).

2 In the Western Arctic, a chief's wife, on learning that her husband's crew has harpooned a whale, had at once to take off one boot and remain quietly in her house. Rasmussen (1927: 313) explains: "This preliminary step towards undressing was supposed to affect the soul of the whale and draw it towards the house. When then the boat neared the land, she must fill her water-vessel with fresh water and go down to the dead whale in order to refresh its thirsting soul with cool water." The wife entices the whale to come to the hunter and at the same time also behaves like the whale and to a certain extent is identified with it.

The hunting complex of all sea mammals has sexual connotations. The sea animals not only originate from the fingers of a woman, they are also metaphorically associated with women as is clearly expressed in the recollections of Victor Tungilik about successful hunting (see Oosten and Laugrand 1999).

106), one should not name the whale out of fear and respect.

Another interesting feature of whales is that they connect different scales. For instance, Randa (1994: 236) observes that *taakslaingiq* not only designates a whale but also a *kanajuq*, a sea scorpion. According to Rasmussen (1930: 79) “the sea scorpions are said to be degenerated whales” or whales as they are perceived by giants (Rasmussen 1929: 214). This capacity to operate at different scales plays an important part in Inuit cosmology (see Saladin d’Anglure 1999). Sizes always depend on the context and in the spiritual world small beings are often the most powerful ones, e.g., the bumble bee of the sea (Laugrand and Oosten 2010b). The *angak-kuit* were especially equipped to deal with changes of scale as their most effective weapons, the *qalu-giujait*, miniature weapons, operated on the level of the *tarniq*, the miniature image of a being.

Pointing at a Whale

Boas (1907: 499) reports that according to Captain Comer “[w]hen a whale was seen, it was customary to point at it with the third finger of the right hand.” He does not specify who did the pointing. Rasmussen (1929: 187) relates concerning whaling traditions in Naujaat (Repulse Bay), “[i]f a woman sees a whale, she must point to it with her middle finger.” This custom evokes an old Aivilik tradition, recorded by Rasmussen from Ivaluardjuk, stating that at the beginning of the world, “when the earth was dark, the only creatures men had to hunt were ptarmigan and hare, and these were hunted by wetting the forefinger and holding it out in the air; the finger then became luminous and it was possible to see the animal hunted.” Nutaraaluk from Iqaluit related how the deceased “used their forefinger as an *angmaaq*, a flint, to light fires” (Oosten, Laugrand and Rasing 1999: 30).

The power of the middle finger was referred to by Pisuk from Rankin Inlet, when he explained how his grandmother taught him to use it as a protection in an *aqtuqsinniq*, a paralyzing dream. When he was attacked in a dream, he made his opponent disappear by pointing at him (Kolb and Law 2001: 192).

Rasmussen (1929: 173) relates how the power of this finger was used by a mother who has just delivered a son: “Every time she drinks, she must put a drop of water into the child’s mouth with her middle finger. This must be done immediately after the child is born, and repeated every time the mother drinks. The finger in question is supposed to possess a peculiar power in regard to infants, so that the

water thus dripping into the mouth will prevent the child from ever suffering from thirst.”

Is the pointing connected to the providing of a drink to the whale? According to Boas (1901: 139) the harpooning of Sedna was compared to the offering of a drink of water. “As to the reason why Sedna must be cut, the people say that it is an old custom, and that it makes her feel better that it is the same as giving a thirsty person drink.” The relation between harpooning and providing a drink of sweet water was emphasized by Lucassie Nutaraaluk from Iqaluit in the story of a hunter who met a walrus that said to him, “I’m so thirsty. Please harpoon me” (Oosten and Laugrand 1999: 197).

Rasmussen (1929: 267) relates the story of a man who had married a bird, and when she left him followed her to her house in the land of the birds. But nobody would approach the bird until the man wetted his first finger with spittle and touched her with it before sitting down, then “she stayed where she was and did not fly away from him again.” Thus he was able to fix the woman and connect her to him. Here, the spitting may be seen as an activation and the pointing of the middle finger appears to be connected to the providing of a drink and the harpooning of an animal. The woman’s action of pointing prefigures the harpooning of the whale by her husband.

Whaling Rules

In the past, whale hunting required the support of all members of the community. Rasmussen (1929: 187) relates:

As soon as a whale is harpooned, the boys must be tied up together, in pairs, one’s left leg to the other’s right, and thus bound, they must hobble off inland until out of sight of the sea. If the boys are an odd number, so that one is left over, then it is his business to push the bound pairs and make them tumble over; for the more they do so, the better. It is supposed that the difficulty experienced by the boys in their progress is communicated to the whale, so that after being harpooned, it finds it hard to swim away. Old women may also be lashed together, but not in the same way. All that is done is to tie their legs together a little above the instep, and in this manner they must also hobble off inland, often falling, rolling about at the small declivities; the harder they find it to advance, and the more they roll about, the slower will be the progress of the whale dragging the boat out with it, and it will not move far from the spot where it was harpooned.

Not only the wives of the hunters but the boys and the old women also have their part to play, so the whale will be towed in without problems. The community as whole supports the hunters wherever possible.

When it has been observed from on shore that a whale is harpooned, no one is allowed to fetch water.

When out whaling, a boat must never be baled out. No one on board is allowed to make water or spit over the side; if spitting is absolutely necessary, one must spit on one's own person. As soon as the whaleboat with the whale in tow is about to land, all young mothers must try to be first down to it, running right out into the water, sometimes up to the waist, and then leap on board with water for their husbands; this will make their sons good hunters (Rasmussen 1929: 187f.).

The prohibition to allow any liquid to go out of the boat may be related to the symbolic association of harpooning with offering a drink to the prey. The provision of water should be done through the harpooning of the animal. Later Rasmussen (1929: 188) adds "In the olden days, when whales were hunted in kayaks, the boys had to do as the young mothers do nowadays, come down and pour water over the fore end of the kayaks as soon as they came towing in to shore. This would make them good whalers." Thus the water seems to be intended for the prow of the kayak, linguistically marked as the penis of the boat. The actions of the women and the boys connect the killing of the whale to the reproduction and regeneration of human society.³

Women with infants, or women who have had a miscarriage, may not boil walrus meat until the backbone of the whale has been broken.

When the boat is within a stone's throw of the shore, maktak is cut up into strips, and the boys and girls divide into separate groups, and the maktak is thrown to them to scramble for. Older persons may also take part. The pieces obtained by women with infants or women who have their menses, or women who have had a miscarriage, are given to old women. The pieces thrown to the boys must be cut with a dice pattern along the strips, those thrown to the girls are marked crosswise. ...

The more one could smear oneself over with blood and blubber when a whale was being cut up, the better, for this would please the Mother of the Sea Beasts (Rasmussen 1929: 188).

A scramble was expected for the *maktak* as an appreciation of the catch. Women who had just delivered or were menstruating were restricted in their participation and their shares were passed on to the older women.

For three days after the capture of a whale, no work was allowed to be done by men or women. In a village where a whale had been captured, no cooking was allowed to be done with fuel obtained from the ground, but only over fires made of bones and blubber, or over the lamp.

3 See also the demand of the deceased in a dream to be given a drink of water as a request to be renamed.

Clothing which had been worn at a whale hunt must never be taken inland in the spring for the caribou hunting (Rasmussen 1929: 188).

Rasmussen's descriptions are very close to the information provided by Boas (1907: 499f.) and derived from Captain Comer. Comer connects the custom to pour fresh water over the prow of the kayak specifically to the kayak of the hunter who first struck the whale. He also relates the use of old clothing during the celebration of the catch: "In cutting up the whale, the people did not avoid getting covered with grease and blood, in order to show to Nuliayoq that they were well pleased with the gift of the whale. For this reason the oldest clothing was worn during this time."

Elders' Recollections of Whaling in Nunavut

In the 1960s, Father Mary-Rouselière interviewed several elders in Mittimatalik who still recalled the time when whaling was important in that area. Qiliqti (Laugrand and Oosten 2009: 253f.) from Mittimatalik recalled that hunters would hunt whales in their *qajait* and that "the wife of the man who killed the bowhead had to remain in bed while the whale was being butchered." Many South Baffin elders recalled the happiness of the people when a whale was caught. Markosie Pisualak from Pangnirtuuq (*Stories from Pangnirtung* 1976: 18–25) related: "There were always women waiting for us on land. When they saw that we pulled a whale behind us, they were so happy that they fired guns into the air and came over to help pull it in. As soon as we landed the whale, we started to work on it. The women helped with the work. They were happy because it was fun." The one who harpooned the whale got the best pay, often a boat or a rifle. Joanasie Kakka recalled, "[w]hen it was time to harpoon the whale, it was believed that the bowhead could be very selective regarding the hunter who was chosen. The bowheads would manifest their preferences regarding the hunter designated to harpoon them. Their wishes had to be respected" (Hay et al. 2000: 59). In Iglulik, Philip Qipanniq remembered that whale hunts required constant attention and concentration. George Kappianaq explained that the length of the harpoon line had not to be too long to pass the flukes of the whale and that if properly hit in the heart, the whale would be killed and it would not sink.

Today, whales are not only hunted less, according to elders they also come less to the coast. In the 1920s, Rasmussen already recorded a tradition among the Aivilingmiut explaining that whales do

not come as close to the coast as they used to do after a whale was harpooned by a woman (1929: 187). The women should have left the harpooning to their husbands. Noah Piugattuk from Iglulik related that whales became more difficult to hunt after a hunter was pushed into the water and kept there until he died while they were cutting up a bowhead whale (Hay et al. 2000: 61).⁴

Nutaraq from Mittimatalik explained the scarcity of whales in terms of the noise people make today with the snowmobiles:

Nowadays ... The floe edge is never without people anymore. When people started hunting there constantly, the whales stopped going under the ice. ... It is because there are so many people down to the floe edge now that it takes the whales longer to come towards land (Oosten and Laugrand 2001: 134).

Elders are aware that much knowledge has been lost. In the 1990s, the Nunavut Wildlife Management Board (NWMB) carried out an Inuit knowledge study of the bowhead that was published in 2000. In the report, Jaco Evic from Pangniqtuuq observed: "It is unfortunate that this workshop is only starting now ... [because] Inuit who are knowledgeable in whaling are no longer with us – they could have relayed information on what is needed and what needs to be done when actually harvesting a bowhead whale" (Hay et al. 2000: 58).

The Bowhead Report (Hay et al. 2000) provides much information on on whaling and related rules and beliefs. Philip Kripanik explained that hunters should never approach or attempt to hunt a bowhead asleep at the surface because it could be very dangerous. Felix Pisuk explained that great care has to be taken when a whale has a calf.

When they [hunters] accidentally killed a calf, when the mother is feeding off somewhere else, the mother would keep coming back to the same location the next year, at the date when the young was killed; the Inuit said that it was mourning its young, with cries, which the Inuit would be able to hear from under water very loud, that is what I heard, and my late uncle confirmed that; he said that it is very sad to watch them mourning; and the traditional law was that you were not supposed to kill the calves of the bowhead whale ... (see also Philip Kripannik and Joseph Oqallak on the same issue; Hay et al. 2000: 46).

Martha Kutitukku from Pelly Bay explained, "[if her calf is killed] ... the mother will always know what area and what kayak has killed the calf. I think it is because they have souls, too, that they would

know which kayak had killed their calf" (Hay et al. 2000: 46). Thus, the elders view whales as sentient beings endowed with conscience and awareness whose feelings have to be respected. Sometimes whales would sanction wrong behaviour. Felix Pisuk, from Kangir&liniq relates how the *angakkuq* Paumiarjuk who killed a lot of people was disciplined: "He was out bowhead whale hunting when his penis was castrated by a bowhead whale and he became a female. He was such a powerful *angakkuq* that he was even able to give birth" (Kolb and Law 2001: 38). The story confirms the close association between the penis and the whale established by Saladin d'Anglure (1999).

Today, elders still remember some of the rules that were used. Jaikku Pitsiulaq stated: "Boys would be told to carry babies on their backs so they could catch a whale easily when they became older." Aalasi Joami recalled: "I think what they say about this making them good whale hunters is true" (Therrien and Laugrand 2001: 177). Preparing boys to become whale hunters is an old tradition. Boas (1901: 363) related: "The carving of a whale is put into the mouth of a new-born male infant in order to make him a good hunter."

Good hunters used to transmit their ability to catch whales. Comer (1910: 89f.) gives the example of a whale hunter called Cumercowyer who could see the whale under water: "When he died he requested that his body should be placed on the ice so that later it would drop into the sea. At the same time he charged his people that when they went off on the ice or in their kayaks for whales, they must throw a piece of meat into the water and call on his spirit to aid them. He promised that he would hear their call and come to their assistance" (Hay et al. 2000: 45).

Jaikku Pitsiulaq related: "Men were advised not to wipe themselves with rocks after defecating. This was so their catches wouldn't sink underwater if the animal was too lean and didn't have enough fat to stay afloat" (Therrien and Laugrand 2001: 177). This advice may be related to a hunting technique described by Boas (1888: 501) of hunting whales in a shallow bay, "If a shoal of them has entered such a bay, the Eskimo take to their boats and kayaks, and by throwing stones frighten them into the shallowest part, where they are easily harpooned."

An important belief was that happiness or joy should not be expressed during the hunt, until the whale is dead and landed, otherwise the whale could be lost (Hay et al. 2000). Showing too much happiness before the whale is dead could result in a *pelurqtuuq* (or *pilluktuk*) (Hay et al. 2000), a transformation of one species into another. In the past,

⁴ A similar version of that story is provided by Nathan Qamaniq.

Inuit believed that bowhead whales could sometimes turn into narwhals when they were harpooned (see Hay et al. 2000: 59). Joy and happiness should be shown after the catch was made and was also expressed in the scramble for the meat and the feast that followed.

The Whale as a Whole

In the past, the whale was a catch that concerned the community as whole. Boas (1888: 582) states emphatically: "A whale belongs to the whole settlement and its capture is celebrated by a feast." The notion of a whole may also play a part in the connection between the whale and the house. Comer (1910: 87) and Boas (1888: 550) relate that Inuit often used old houses with walls made of whale ribs as *qarmat*. These old houses could be found everywhere in the land, and Inuit today still talk about these houses. Johnny Nataq discussed the use of jawbones for the construction of houses in a workshop in Rankin Inlet in 2010. According to Boas (1901: 165), the sea woman is believed to live in a lower world, in a house built of stone and whale ribs. The notion of the house suggests a whole that often encompassed several families. Boas (1888: 603) quotes Parry relating that after a successful whale catch the whale was dragged into a stone enclosure,

[i]t appears that the whole whale or a principal part of it is dragged into the enclosure, where some of the men are employed in cutting it up and throwing the pieces over the wall to the rest, who stand ready to receive them outside; while within the women range themselves in a circle around the whale and continue singing during the operation. ... Each of these structures ... was the distinct property of a particular individual; and had probably, in its turn, been the seat of feasting and merriment either to the present owner, or those from whom he had inherited it.

Captain Parry's description suggests that the whaling rituals provided a framework to build individual prestige. Whereas in the Western Arctic an *umialik*, an owner of a whaling boat, was as a recognized leader or "chieftain" and given an "unrestricted authority" over its crew (see Rasmussen 1927: 312), the owners of the constructions described by Parry may have had a similar position in the Canadian Arctic.⁵ Boas reports (1907: 493) a whaling feast in which the *angakkuit* danced:

When the whale-meat was cooked, the people sat down in a half-circle of stones, to which all the food was brought.

There they had a feast, accompanied by games. It is said that the whale skin and meat were piled up in the centre, and that each angakok in turn would dance around this pile, while the people sat around the circle of stones. Women sang songs, accompanying the dance. Evidently the half-circle of stones here mentioned is the same as the structure described by Parry. Captain Comer states that he has seen several of these half-circles in various parts of the country.

Rasmussen (1929: 188) provides a description of such a feast organized in a stone enclosure, emphasizing the role of the older women who would feast with the men and eat from the cooking pot whereas the younger women and children would not be allowed to take part in this meal. The meaning of the stone enclosure is unclear. It may evoke the shape of the house or that of the drum. Other sea mammals were taken into the house of the hunter to be taken care of by his wife. In the case of the whale this was not feasible and the stone enclosure may have provided a "house" for the whale contrasting with the houses of human beings that were made of whalebones and sod. In the Western Arctic the drum is used to attract whales. Ernie Frankson Sr., an Inupiaq whaling captain from Point Hope and leader of a group of dancers in Tikigaq, stated that "the drum is the whale and the whale is the drum" (Frankson 2005 in Sakakibara 2009: 291). In the Canadian Eastern Arctic there are also references to this relationship. Pauta Saila from Cape Dorset related, "[i]n the old days when they caught big whales by kayak, they would drum to attract the animal – to make it easy catching" (Eber 1989: 35). Boas (1888: 601) reports the use of the fin of a whale when making of a drum: "The drum is made from the skin of the deer [or seal], which is stretched over a hoop made of wood, or of bone from the fin of a whale, by the use of a strong, braided cord of sinew passed around a groove on the outside." Today, northern communities often organize music festivals or drumming before they start the whale hunting. Music and songs facilitate the connection between humans and animals. If animals are pleased, they will accept to come and give themselves to the hunter. Abe Okpik recalls:

Some people would see an animal in the sea, like a bowhead whale for instance. They would get some old man or old woman who knew their language and they would chant and the whale would come closer. That's when they would get it. They called that *atulluk* which means that through your song you hypnotize the mammal to come near. It is like when you go hunting seals, if you have a guitar, piano, accordion or something, and you make noise, they will come right over (McComber 2005: 63).

⁵ See Stevenson (1997); see also Rasmussen (1927: 312–315) for the Nalukataq whaling feast in the Western Arctic.

Pauta Saila related, “[w]hen a hunter on a kayak speared a whale, other kayakers would be nearby. They’d begin to chant – so the whale would not try to get away from the hunter. People would chant in order that the whale would stay in one place – to make it easier to kill – and while they chanted, they took out the laces from their kamiit. They would take out the laces so the muscles of the whale would be loose” (Eber 1989: 36). Music is thus a means to attract animals. The sensitivity of whales to sounds may also explain why Inuit were fascinated by foreign musical instruments and traditions brought by the Euro-American whalers (see Lutz 1978).

These feasts probably disappeared when the whale hunts were no longer performed, but in some regions traditions might be retained. Thus, Freeman (1968: 26–28) reports that in both the James Bay and Cumberland regions the return of the whale hunt was marked with singing and thanking acts performed by the hunters, their women, and teenage girls:

One 39 year-old man recounted how men towing large whales back to shore in Cumberland Sound would sing when in sight of land, “Of course they were very happy, they might have rowed three or four days without sleeping.” The women and the other people on land would start singing as soon as the mens’ singing was heard. When the men reached shore, some would roll on the beach; this general happiness and excitement evoked *qujaliniq* responses including songs Freeman (1968: 27 f.).

Freeman observes that the notion of *qujaliniq* is now used for a Thanksgiving prayer in the morning and evening services of Anglican Inuit (see *The Book of Common Prayer* 1960), suggesting that today Christian prayers and hymns play a part in whaling.⁶

Bowhead Hunting Today

Contemporary bowhead hunting practises are very different from those of the past but continuities are striking. Elders such as Aupilaarjuk, from Kangir&liniq, have argued for a long time that Inuit never hunted the whales until extinction, but that this was due to commercial whaling and that now “Inuit should be in charge of how the bowhead are hunted. Inuit should be in charge of their land because we do not try to hunt animals until they are extinct.”

6 Similarly Saladin d’Anglure (1999: 94) observed that when the whale was killed in Iglulik at the request of Noah Piugaattuk, a feast was organized and the old man start singing, mixing traditional songs with Christian hymns.

In the sixties and seventies, a few whales were caught (see Saladin d’Anglure 1999: 89) but after that no whales were caught until 1994, when Noah Piugaattuk from Iglulik announced on the radio, that he wished to taste once more whale *maktak* before dying. His relatives heeded his wish and killed a whale. The catch was followed by a feast. The catch was controversial as it was prohibited by law, but most Inuit supported it (see Saladin d’Anglure 1999).

After this illegal catch, and after the Canadian Department of Fisheries and Oceans recognized that they had largely underestimated the number of whales in the Eastern Arctic waters, a dozen legal bowhead hunts were organized in Nunavut and another two in Nunavik. In the following section we show how whales connect Inuit to their past and provide them an occasion to share joy and meat in a modern context.

The first approved bowhead hunt took place in Naujaat in 1996 and was filmed by CBC and IBC. A whale was shot, but it sank and only rose to the surface two days later. Its *maktak* was lost. The hunt was described as a fiasco by the local and international press. Inuit whale hunters explained that they did not use the harpoon gun they were instructed to use and that they would now purchase a proper harpoon and elect a hunt captain (Bourgeois 1998).⁷ The second whale hunt took place in 1998 in Pangniqtuuq. Hunters were trained, and Jaco Eevik was named Captain of the hunt. The whale meat and *maktak* were distributed throughout Nunavut, so all its residents could participate in the feast. Since 1998, legal whale hunts took place every two years, as in Coral Harbour in 2000 and Iglulik (Hall Beach) in 2002.

Now a bowhead hunt is allowed in each of the three regions of Nunavut. Communities take turns and the community in charge shares meat and *maktak* with the other communities.

In August 2005, a crew of hunters led by Marcel Mapsalak caught a 54-foot bowhead whale in Naujaat. He stated that the fact that the Naujaat community keeps traditions alive explains why the 2005 hunt went more smoothly than the one in 1996 (Folger 2005).

In 2008, more bowhead hunts took place in Kuqaaruk, Hall Beach, and Cape Dorset. In Cape Dorset the hunt was very successful but the towing of the whale that was over 50 feet in length took many hours (Anonymous 2009). In Nunavik, two bowhead whale hunts were also organized in 2008 and

7 See Saladin d’Anglure (1999: 96–100) for a description of the ill-fated whale hunt at Repulse Bay in 1996.

2009. The first hunt took place near Kangiqsujuaq. Journalist Noble (2008b) reports:

Noah Annahatak thrust a harpoon into a bowhead whale Aug. 10, marking the first bowhead kill on Nunavik's Hudson Strait coast in more than a century. [The animal measured] 15-metres and weighing in at 49 tonnes. "This is so special for us," Pirlurtuut said, practically speechless with joy. "It makes us proud; ..."

[Later, the] 49-tonne whale was moored to three orange buoys on the edge of the bay ... Canoes ferried on-lookers to the site and the slicing of maktak began. Slabs were shorn off, hooked, pulled ashore and then passed around. Maktak was laid atop plywood strips, Tupperware tops and bare rock, then diced with ulus and pocket knives.

Naalak Nappaaluk, who at age 80 is one of the few Nunavimmiut to remember tales of bowhead hunts that once took place, sat on a rock with a pad of maktak nearby.

"Today, I've seen people standing on the bowhead for the first time," Nappaaluk said. "It's overwhelming."

The whale provides joy to the hunters as well as to the community. The hunt reconnects the hunters to the traditions of their ancestors giving strength to Inuit cultural traditions. Freeman et al. (1998: 19) quotes Johny Mike, from Pangnirtuuq:

When I go whale hunting ... there's lot of things that go through my mind ... about the world where we were before, where my ancestors were coming from. Yeah, you can almost hear echoes (from the past) when you are whale hunting.

In another article by Noble (2008a), more details were given:

The bowhead whale hunt began with a prayer on the beach.

Aqujaq Qisiq, the whaling captain, and Vincent Cormier, from the federal department of fisheries and oceans, signed a licence authorizing the take of one bowhead before a cheering crowd.

Within hours the first hunters were off. ...

The next day, Sunday, the hunters sighted another bowhead.

"The whale was huge," said a young hunter. "When it blows you can see it from miles away."

But no one hunts on Sundays, so this whale also went free.

Instead, hunters came ashore for a music festival – called the Bowhead Whale Music Festival – in honour of the hunt.

"We were hoping to have a whale by the festival," said Mary Pilurtuut, the mayor of Kangiqsujuaq.

Among those watching the performances, which included a bevy of local drummers and a family band from Nunavut, was Naalak Nappaaluk, who turned 80 last month.

More than 20 years ago, Nappaaluk helped begin the push for the bowhead hunt, common during his youth.

... Nappaaluk was confident they would get it though, remembering what elders once told him.

"If a bowhead doesn't want to be hunted the skin will tense up and it's impossible to hunt him. When he doesn't mind being hunted you can go at him and cut him up easily. That's how they are," he said.

The second Nunavik bowhead hunt conducted in 2009 resulted in mixed feelings due to various difficulties met by the hunters who killed laboriously and mistakenly an adult female whale of 56 feet in length (Rogers 2009a). In her second report Sarah Rogers (2009b) observed the extensive sharing and feasting activities that resulted from the hunt stating that fourteen communities in Nunavik joined the hunt and received whale meat and *maktak* (Rogers 2009b, see also George 2008a).

In 2009, a bowhead whale hunt took place in Rankin Inlet and a 17-metres whale was caught. The Nunavut's Inuit land claims organization, Nunavut Tunngavik Inc., managed to convince the Nunavut Wildlife Management Board to recommend raising the annual quota from two to three whales a year, a decision that was approved by the Federal Fisheries Minister Gail Shea in 2009. In coming years, more bowhead whale hunts will probably be organized since it is now clear that with a population of about 43,105 bowhead whales, the number of whales in the Arctic waters might be in fact 15 times greater than the Department of Fisheries and Oceans thought eight years before (George 2008b). Nunavut Tunngavik Inc. concluded that the bowhead whale population should be healthy enough to justify the removal of bowhead whale quotas (George 2008c) and now wants to obtain unrestricted bowhead hunt in Nunavut (George 2009).

Modern whale hunts are clearly very different from those from the past in many ways. For instance, the technology hunters use today is entirely modern and consists of a grenade that is speared into the animal to avoid a drawn-out death. It is expected that in about a five-to six-second gap the grenade explodes. To be successful hunters need to be well trained since the spearer must aim at the brain, or the heart, or the lungs. But in other aspects, the whale is still seen as a vital aspect of Inuit hunting traditions.

Sharing *maktak*, Valorizing Hunting

A most appreciated part of the whale was and still is the *maktak* that can be eaten in great quantities. This appetite for *maktak* is nothing new, and in the 19th century Kumlien (1879: 20) already observed that

maktak was “esteemed the greatest delicacy.” The sharing of *maktak* remains a key element in contemporary whale hunting activities. Interviews with Inuit elders by Freeman provide much information on its value and significance.

Elders remember the taste of *maktak* as they ate in their youth and can develop a craving for it. Joseph Keenainak related that “[a]fter the older people have eaten something they have not eaten for a long time, their spirits seem to lift up; and they seem to be more alive (Hay et al. 2000: 57–62). Lypa Pisiulak from Pangnirtuuq declared: “The Inuit at Ummangjuaq were ‘thirsty’ when it came to the bowhead whales ... Those Inuit were hungry for bowhead maktak (Freeman et al. 1998: 29). John Kaunak recalled his grandmother used to say, “I wish a bowhead whale could be harvested while I am still alive.” Unfortunately, she died before a bowhead whale was ever harvested and Kaunak concluded, “I am sure that she would have lived longer. Elders must be respected and provided with food that they had grown up with” (Hay et al. 2000: 56; see also N. Tassugat, and N. Piugaattuk).

Elders point out that whale hunts are also very important for feasts and gatherings and emphasize the importance of sharing the whale meat (see Freeman et al. 1998: 34; Freeman 2005: 66). Oolletoa Temela from Kimmirut stated, “[t]hese gatherings and sharings are as much a part of our culture as our language” (Freeman et al. 1998: 33). Angela Gibbons from Coral Harbour went even further, “[i]f the right to hunt is taken away, the Inuit will die, either physically or emotionally” (Freeman et al. 1998: 39). Tina Netser, also from Coral Harbour, stressed the importance of the whale for the body, “[o]nce we don’t have the whales’s nutrients in our bodies, it’s like part of our bodies is missing” (Freeman et al. 1998: 39).

Many elders agree that there is a need to take up bowhead hunting again so these animals do not disappear. Sabina Issigaitoq from Hall Beach stated, “[t]he bowhead whale too, if it is not hunted anymore will become less and less. ... People say that the animals have to be hunted continuously” (Hay et al. 2000: 59).

Today, after having been banned or restricted for many years, the issue of whale hunting has become a question of respecting Inuit cultural traditions and valorizing hunting values. Freeman et al. (1998: 28, 39) quote elders Johnny Mike from Pangnirtuuq and Mosesie Idlout from Resolute who consider whale hunting as the core of Inuit traditions. Peter Okpik, from Gjoa Haven, confirmed: “A person is born with animals. He has to eat animals. That is why the animals and a person are just like one” (Freeman

et al. 1998: 39). Simionie Akpalialuk, from Pangnirtuuq, declared in March 1995:

[Our] relationship to the land is very important because the land is alive, the animals and the sea itself; and you are interacting [with them] ... Going to catch a whale, the feeling that you get is never what you get going down to the store. Going down to the store, you’re on dead ground: ... but here in the North, it’s a lot more ... A whale gives of itself: it’s an animal that you feel fully about, it’s something that gives itself up to you and that’s an important thing in our beliefs, that’s still very strong (Freeman et al. 1998: 42).

Hunting embodies a living relation to the land and its animals; the hunter has to go out to hunt the animal that gives itself up to be killed. An Inuk from Sanikiluaq stressed the danger of Inuit becoming very weak if they did not continue whale hunting. According to him, fresh meat keeps the body in shape: “Only animals keep us strong as Inuit ... When we haven’t taken seal blubber for a while, we weaken ...” (Freeman et al. 1998: 45).

Hunting is a key value of Inuit cultures and a condition of its survival. Only through hunting can the vitality of Inuit life, culture, and values be preserved. Though the connection between whales and shamanism might be less visible, the bowhead whale takes a central place in the preservation of the hunting complex, involving the whole community in the hunt as well as in the sharing of its meat and *maktak*.

Conclusion

For many centuries, whale hunting has been an integral part of Inuit culture. The whale hunt involved the whole community. It also provided opportunities to build individual prestige (cf. the role of the owner of the whalebone constructions who was probably also the host of the whale feast). Traditional whaling was firmly embedded in a cosmological framework connecting whaling and shamanism. Men as well as women played a part in the whale hunt and their collaboration was essential to the success of the hunt. Bernard Saladin d’Anglure emphasized the phallic connotations of the whale and these play an important part in many contexts. Yet the whale is most often associated with the idea of a whole, involving and encompassing the community in the hunt and its celebrations.

When the whalers came, Inuit adapted to the new technologies and collaborated closely with the whalers. Many ritual rules were still observed in the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century and

even the Euro-American whaler captains took them into account. The overkill of whales by Euro-American whalers in the Arctic waters meant the end of a long tradition of whaling in most Inuit communities. Many elders still remember the whaling of the past, and in their testimonies the great value attached to whaling comes to the fore. Even though many Inuit desired to resume whaling, the hunt was prohibited to ensure the survival of the whale in Arctic waters. The famous whale hunt organized in 1994 to provide Noah Piugaattuk from Iglulik with a taste of *maktaq* before he died, played an important part in triggering the revival of whaling in the Canadian Eastern Arctic. Most Inuit approved the hunt and advocated a resumption of whaling. The DFO (Department of Fisheries and Oceans) had to revise its estimate of the number of whales and conceded that Inuit hunters were correct in their assessment of an abundance of whales in Arctic waters.

After 1994, the Inuit resumed whaling with great energy and enthusiasm, and the revived whaling traditions show many features that were characteristic of the traditional whaling complex. Thus, whaling is still a matter involving the whole community as well as the whole area as meat is shared between the communities. Whaling is still firmly embedded in a religious context. Thus, a whale cannot be caught on a Sunday and any whale hunting has to be prepared carefully with prayer and religious services.⁸

A few years ago, when 629 belugas were trapped in the ice, Inuit from Mittimatalik considered this providential hunt as a gift from God to humans (see Laugrand and Oosten 2010b). Today, many hunters believe that whales like other animals belong to God who is their real owner. The idea that the whale is a conscious and sentient being is very much alive among hunters.

Hunters in the Canadian Arctic emphasize that whaling connects Inuit to the past. It is closely connected to the dynamics of Inuit traditions and knowledge, "*Inuit qaujimajatuqangit*" (Freeman et al. 1998: 60).

In 2008, when Kangiqsujuaq in Nunavik got its first bowhead in a century, Pirlurtuut clearly ex-

pressed this feeling of reconnecting with the past when he stated "It makes us proud; we're back with our ancestors" (Noble 2008b).

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⁸ The connection between whale hunting and Christianity is also very strong in the Western Arctic. Thus, Eben Hopson, founder of ICC and the Alaska Eskimo Whaling Commission (1979, quoted in Freeman et al. 1998: 55; Freeman 2005: 70) is not afraid to compare the whaling hunting traditions with Christian feasts: "We are the People of the Whale. The taking and sharing of the whale is our Eucharist and Passover. The whaling festival is our Easter and Christmas, the Arctic celebrations of the mysteries of life" (see also Freeman et al. 1998: 57 and Jolles 2002).

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