



New Debates and New Orientations in Inuit Ethnohistory*

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Summary

In North America, the first attempts to document Inuit history are only decades old. In the meantime, the ethno-historical approach has been subjected to the same influences as its parent disciplines, anthropology and history. In recent years, scholars as well as Inuit have called for participatory research, and for the inclusion of oral historical data and of indigenous views on history. This is reflected in issues of authorship and voice. In Greenland, literacy and the abundance of written sources make the collection of oral history less compelling. Everywhere in the Arctic, the tension between Western scholarly ways of presenting history, and what their Inuit counterparts, remains unresolved. The review concludes by advocating comparative approaches of historicities and of traditions of historical representation.

This paper presents some reflections on current debates and prospects concerning studies of the history of Inuit and Yupik – with a focus on North America¹. The word «ethnohistory» in the title would be too restrictive if I did not immediately add that, under this banner, I subsume many works which do not claim to be ethnohistorical (e.g. anthropological history, historical anthropology, historical ethnography, longitudinal ethnographies, life histories, etc.; for a discussion, see KRECH 1991). In this sense, the prefix «ethno» refers to the broad definition of ethnohistory as «(the study of) the history of the peoples normally studied by anthropologists» (STURTEVANT 1966: 6; other definitions, see KRECH 1991; 2002; CSONKA 2005a). To introduce the topic, the next few paragraphs are devoted to a brief review of the development and current status of Inuit and Yupik (ethno)-history.

The rise of ethnohistory in the American Arctic

If we wish to take stock of (ethno)historical research in Inuit and Yupik societies and cultures – and with the partial exception of Greenland, whose particular situation in this regard I will allude to further below –, we do not have to look far back in time: not earlier than the 1960s. Except in sweeping and superficial overviews, there have been no major efforts to

document their history before that time: such is the undisputed conclusion of reviews by BURCH (1979b, about Northern North America), VANSTONE (1983, about ethnohistory in Alaska), and more recently by DAMAS (1998, about ethnohistory in the Central Arctic) and by GRANT (1997, about history in the Canadian Arctic). According to BURCH, «Northern ethnography has long been characterized by a shocking lack of understanding of, if not outright disdain for, evidence of social change. [...] The ahistorical (if not *antihistorical*) approach continued to characterize most ethnographic research during the 1950s» (1979b: 91). The reviews cited above consider that, despite the fact that they focused explicitly on problems of culture change, the community studies conducted in Alaska and in the Northwest Territories of Canada in the 1950s and 1960s, failed to present them in historical perspective (BURCH 1979b, VANSTONE 1983: 292).

Among the pioneering ethnohistorical studies of the Yupik and Iñupiat of Alaska are those of BURCH (1975), OSWALT (1960, 1963), VANSTONE (1967), LANTIS (1970), and RAY (1964, 1975). In Canada, the first comprehensive accounts on some aspects of Inuit history were published during the 1970s, such as Ross' (1975) study of relationships between whalers

* This is a revised and expanded version of a paper I presented in the Memory and History session of the Thirteenth Inuit Studies Conference in Anchorage in August 2002. My participation was financed by *Memory and History in Nunavut*, a collaborative project between the GETIC (Inuit and Circumpolar Studies Group) at Laval University in Quebec, the Nunavut Arctic College, and the Pajirijait Tigumivik Society in Iqaluit. *Memory and History in Nunavut* was funded by a special Canadian SSHRC program fostering Community-University Research Alliances (CURA), and was led by François Trudel. My aims with the original presentation were to contribute to the general theme of the conference, «Voices from Indigenous communities: research, reality, and reconciliation», and to broach discussion on matters of common interest with North American colleagues.

¹ The Inuit Circumpolar Conference (ICC) recommends using the term *Inuit* to designate the peoples formerly called Eskimo, including those, in Southwestern Alaska and in nearby Siberia, who speak Yupik languages and are also known as *Yupik*.



and Inuit in Hudson Bay, and TAYLOR's (1974) study of changing settlement patterns in Labrador. The *Arctic* volume of the *Handbook of North American Indians* (DAMAS 1984) is a major example of historical ethnography, but I believe it has more often been perceived as ethnographical than as historical.

Most of the early studies of Inuit and Yupik history were based almost exclusively on written sources – and, needless to say, these sources had been written by outsiders. Nevertheless, significant progress was achieved between the 1960s and 1980s. Particularly important, in light of earlier ethnographies, was the fact that studying history acknowledged that Inuit and Yupik did indeed *have* a History. Methods to deal with the particular kinds of sources were also developed and refined during that period – then applied to Arctic topics. But, as some have pointed out – here in WASHBURN and TRIGGER's (1996: 107) recent formulation,

it has been argued that the major accomplishment of ethnohistory so far is not what has been learned about how Native people have perceived their experiences over the years but what it is revealing about Euro-American attitudes toward Native people.

Debates about the current «state of the art»

Significant paradigm shifts have taken place within anthropology in the last two decades of the 20th century. The main driving forces behind these shifts were (in no particular order):

- a) changes in scholarly paradigms concomitant with the so-called «post modernist» drift, and associated reflexivity and relativism,
- b) Indigenous empowerment, and
- c) the growing importance accorded to (researching) Indigenous knowledge.

These three aspects are of course related to each other, and they are not limited to the Inuit-Yupik, nor even to the Northern Indigenous realms. Within the anthropologically-informed historical approaches, these trends have manifested themselves in a highly increased interest in oral sources, oral history, life histories, and more generally in Indigenous views on history.

Concerning the Eastern and Central Arctic, CONDON's (posthumous) history of *The Northern Copper Inuit* (1996), EBER's *When the Whalers Were Up North* (1989), and MARY-ROUSSELIÈRE's *Qitdlarssuaq* (1980), provide interesting examples; so actually does DORAIS' *Quaqtaq* (1997), although it does not present itself as a work of history. BURCH (1975, 1988a, 1991, 1998) has provided convincing demonstrations that oral sources, in some cases, allow reliable and detailed historical reconstructions of Northwest Alaskan Inupiaq past. FIENUP-RIORDAN (1994, 2000) has published significant contributions on historical aspects of Yupik cultures and societies. One may also mention here CRUIKSHANK's work with Yukon First Nations (1992, 2000), as her publications have been positively acknowledged by many Arctic anthropologists and historians².

The current state of the art in the presentation of the histories of Inuit and Yupik in North America prescribes that it include Indigenous voices and Indigenous understandings of history – something that is best achieved through research partnership. Among recent works, even those that only slightly do so, DAMAS (2002), DICK (2001), or FOSSETT (2001), acknowledge the importance of this aspect. It is at this point that we find ourselves confronted with two diverging points of view.

Some believe that professional history and Indigenous views on history are in most circumstances mutually exclusive, and cannot be reconciled, nor combined (MORANTZ 1998), at least not in simple ways (TRUDEL, 2000, criticizing the deficient inclusion of Native voices in the report of the Canadian Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples). In this perspective, Indigenous views on history are at best subordinated to that of the professional (usually non-Inuit) historian. For example: «While every historian recognizes the importance of understanding how events appeared to those who participated in them, this is for the most part a means to historical understanding rather than its end» (WASHBURN and TRIGGER 1996: 107). In this situation, the historian builds a discourse which is a meta-narrative of the Indigenous discourse.

According to an opposite opinion, quite widespread today (perhaps also because it is more correct politically), Indigenous views must be combined with the White historian's account – and somehow on the same epistemological level. To cite a typical assertion: «The present essay ... argues for braiding the metahistorical frameworks that produce American Indian narratives into future writings of richer, more culturally nuanced, and many-voiced accountings» (NABOKOV 1996: 11-12)³.

Authorship and voices

Let us note that such views implicitly assume that the input of the professional (historian, anthropologist), usually an outsider to the community studied, remains an essential ingredient, and that the validity of the product will be increased by the juxtaposition of different approaches, emic and etic, as exemplified in the following quote: «In this catalog, Alutiiq and non-Alutiiq authors share perceptions from all sides of this on-going dialogue, and contribute to a

² Historians interested in Inuit cultures have often found theoretical inspiration as well as methodological innovations in works about Northern North American Indians (CRUIKSHANK, KRECH, TRIGGER, cited in this paper, but they are by far not the only ones worth mentioning).

³ These last two citations are excerpted from the second and the first chapter of the North America volumes of the recent *Cambridge History of the Native Peoples of the Americas* – chapters which were intended to «ensure that readers were aware of the socially constituted nature of history» (TRIGGER 2002: 97).



process of collaborative discovery» (CROWELL 2001: 3). This corresponds to the practical application, which recent political developments in the North American Arctic have facilitated, of programs set forth by proponents of postmodernism starting in the 1980s (TYLER 1986).

This type of approach raises the questions of both authorship and intellectual property rights. For instance, the intention of braiding multiple voices is reflected in the manner authors are presented on cover pages: e.g. «Ann Fienup Riordan with William Tyson, Paul John, Marie Meade, John Active» (four Native elders, 2000); «Richard Condon, with Julia Ogina and the Holman elders» (1996), «Melanie Gagnon and Iqaluit elders» (2002). This also goes for life histories, e.g. «Nancy Wachowich, in collaboration with Apphia Agalakti Awa, Rhoda Kaukjak Katsak, and Sandra Pikujak Katsak» (1999), Kusiq's life history authored under his name (BODFISH 1991), although more than half the book is written by others, primarily Schneider (whereas the geographically and temporally close life history of Sadie Brower Niaqoq appeared under the authorship of Margaret BLACKMAN 1989), etc.⁴ The questions: «whose discourse is it?» and «for what public?» are not systematically answered. The advantages of multiple-voice accounts have been widely publicized; the associated risk, that the hybrid produced may still, to a degree that is difficult to identify, be controlled essentially by the White professional, has received less explicit attention. Perhaps because many are loath to acknowledge that introducing Native voices into a scholarly text, as HASTRUP writes, «is a strategy of incorporating the others into a decidedly western kind of logocentrism» (1995: 150, see also p. 151). In recent years, there has been a florescence of publications of Indigenous discourse that are less and less edited, nearing the verbatim, and where the scholar, the outsider, hides behind the scene after a few introductory lines. This trend may be interpreted at least partly as the outcome of an implicit strategy to deal with the uneasiness of the scholar about her role. KRUPNIK'S *Let our Elders Speak* (2000) consists of verbatim transcriptions (but in Russian, not in the original vernacular) of interviews with Native Chukotkan Yuit, and his more recent *Our Words Put to Paper* (2002) similarly contains St. Lawrence Island Yupik testimonies – also mostly in English. The two series *Interviewing Inuit Elders* (five volumes published between 1999 and 2001), and *Inuit Perspectives on the 20th Century* (1999, 2001, both published by Nunavut Arctic College in Iqaluit) go even further since they are verbatim (unabridged?) renditions of interviews of elders by young Inuit⁵. These young Inuit conducted the interviews in a classroom within the context of courses taught by non-Inuit anthropologists, and the books are published in English translation only. It is difficult to present any text, in the making of which an outside professional was involved, as an authentic and unadulterated account of Native views – but in our globalized world this line of questioning may well make less and less sense. Lest I be misunderstood, none of the above should be taken as criticism – except in the professional sense of gaining an awareness of the epistemological context of the sources.

Future perspectives

KRECH had summarized the debate I mentioned above when he spoke of «the tension between ethnohistory as indigenous historiography and ethnohistory as a more or less conventionally (that is, in a positivistic sense) conceived history of an ethnos.» (1991: 361). In my opinion, this «tension», while real, should not be overdrawn. Firstly, as WASHBURN and TRIGGER remarked, «it is contrary to historiographical experience to suggest that ethnohistorians cannot acquire some understanding of the history of an alien culture or that histories cannot be written about peoples who were themselves not interested in history» (1996: 105). Secondly, it is common knowledge that non-Inuit scholars do not all agree on a single interpretation of history – and indigenous representations of their own history are not monolithic either. These are certainly not uniform across the Inuit world: as example, let us only think of the concern for accuracy and richness of detail evident in the testimonies of BURCH'S Iñupiat informants (e.g. 1988a, 1991, 1998), as opposed to the apparent lack of interest for history which he (1979a: 201-2), and later I (CSONKA 1995: 19), found to be prevalent among the Caribou Inuit, at least among a certain generation.

Is it necessary, for the advancement of the discipline, to produce from now on nothing but multi-voiced accounts «combining» (how?) different points of view? I don't think so – it would certainly be more meaningful to let different genres coexist, not necessarily within the same book or paper, but in separate works – and in different media, discarding our obsession with printed paper. Those who call with insistence for the inclusion of Native voices into their writing are the ones more oriented towards field research, and indeed, continued access to their field and informants may depend on publishing local views, with the community's approval – «necessity makes virtue». And do Inuit need partnerships with non-Inuit scholars to elaborate their own history? As we have just seen, the opposite becomes increasingly true. What one may safely assume is that Inuit must gain a sense of having repatriated some of the authority on interpretation and representation. As TRIGGER (2002: 102) expressed it,

it is peculiar and unacceptable when a people's history is studied exclusively, or even primarily, by outsiders. In all studies of relatively recent history, it is normal that the greatest academic interest should come from those people whose own past and cultures are investigated. [...] That native people do not yet play the leading role

⁴ Typographical cues such as size of font and alphabetical order reflect subtleties in the way authorship is presented to the reader. The outsider, anthropologist, often comes first, and sometimes appears alone on the back edge of the book (exception see note 5). Additional subtleties are introduced through discrepancies between authors listed and copyright holders.

⁵ The volumes of these two series are authored by the Inuit elders who were interviewed. The anthropologists appear as «editors», and their names are printed in smaller font on the cover pages.



in the professional study of their own history and anthropology is an anomaly that requires correction. Only when this anomaly has been eliminated will the legacy of colonialism and ethnocentrism truly be exorcised from these professions.

Shall we witness a split of historical representations according to ethnic lines, the outsiders producing Western-style histories, and the Inuit, Inuit-style histories? What about «purely» Inuit history, then? Inuit of course do have their own representations of history, and these have traditionally been oral – to this day, few have come to share Western scholars' obsession with texts and printed materials. Little effort has been expended on finding out what Inuit might conceive of as equivalent or comparable to the Western notions of history (CSONKA 2005b). Recent expressions that reflect Inuit historical consciousness include photographs (PITSEOLAK and EBER 1975), films (KUNUK's *Atanarjuat*, 2001), multimedia CDs and websites, (e.g. the «Jukebox» oral historical projects in Alaskan Native communities), and museum exhibits (commented in GRABURN 1998). In the matter of historical interpretation, «there is no monopoly on truth. [...] Can we imagine a native American ethnohistorian interpreting a particular event in precisely the same way as a Euroamerican one? [...] In studying complex historical situations, truth is well served by diversity.» (TRIGGER 1986: 263).

The following passage is representative of the way many anthropologists imagine that Indigenous peoples conceive their past:

the verb 'bequeathed' has been used to characterize how Indian historians often consider their calling. Perhaps the analogy to material inheritance has heuristic value in communicating the senses of property and responsibility that are often found in Indian notions of history. Conceiving of the past as a collective dowry, which subsequent generations must maintain in high repair, as a sort of cultural capital from which they can draw ideological and spiritual interest, helps us understand why Indian history must stay receptive to synthesis, accretion, and refurbishment. (Nabokov 1996: 54)

Without much of a grain of salt, one could apply the above just as well to conventional Western historiography. Who can claim that Western history is not constantly open to new interpretations and refurbishment? Asking this question here is not meant to belittle the expertise gained by the discipline of history in the criticism of documentary evidence, nor to provide support to an extreme form of relativism. Rather, it is intended as a reminder that the debate about how, and by whom, history should be written, reflects relations of power between distinct cultures and societies, more often than any intrinsic superiority (by whose criteria?) of one discourse over others.

And Greenland?

As I mentioned (note *), my intention with this paper was to address primarily North American developments. However, at the time I wrote it, the

contrasts between the above, and corresponding developments in Greenland, were acutely on my mind. I believe that the debates summarized above should not be ignored in historical studies of Greenland, be it only because research on Inuit has long been a field with an very international character. In the early 1920s, when they undertook the Fifth Thule Expedition throughout the North American Arctic, Mathiassen, Birket-Smith and Rasmussen were primarily interested in discovering Inuit origins – the question framing was thus historical⁶. Since their time, international communication among scholars specializing in the study of Arctic cultures has remained intense; nonetheless, national scholarly traditions are still quite distinct. Long-distance communications among Arctic residents themselves have increased tremendously during the past few decades. But here again, although forces like the Inuit Circumpolar Conference (ICC) tend to re-unite them, Inuit cultures can be perceived as continually drifting apart from each other, since separation after initial Thule culture settlement, in the early centuries of the second millennium, AD, and through subsequent centuries of divergent historical developments.

The amount of written historical sources is massively greater for Greenland than for any other part of the Inuit and Yupik world, and this mine remains in great part unexploited. This has allowed historians to set directly to work. They can do so without having to fuss, like their North American counterparts, with the fieldwork that is required to collect supplementary oral data, nor with the kind of training in anthropological methods and concepts the collection and interpretation of such data presuppose.

This tendency is supported by other differences with the situation in North America. One of them is that Indigenous Knowledge (designated by the acronym IK) has not been granted, in Greenland and among Danish researchers, the high profile it has reached in Native Northern North America in the past decade. Consequently, Greenlanders' oral history and social memory are not investigated to any extent comparable to recent projects carried out among American Inuit (e.g. the project *Memory and History in Nunavut*, see note *). Another difference is that literacy among Greenlanders is much older than among North American Inuit and Yupik. Thus, some written historical sources originate from Greenlanders themselves, and they are used as historical sources (to cite but a couple of examples, LANGGÅRD 1998, and THUESEN 1988). Furthermore, West Greenlanders have been exposed to manuals (and a newspaper) presenting Danish-Greenlandic views on history since shortly after the middle of the nineteenth

⁶ Notwithstanding the fact that Birket-Smith's and Rasmussen's approach to this question, which aimed at proving Steensby's hypotheses, was not adequate, and its results proved wrong (BURCH 1979b: 91, 1988b, CSONKA 1995: 4-9). For an evaluation of Birket-Smith's role in research on Greenland, see DYBBROE and MØLLER (1991: 370-375).



century (KLEIVAN 1991). The original Greenlandic sense of history, whatever it may have been, is presumed to have been adulterated by such exposure. In such a situation, the incentive to resort to oral sources in order to elucidate the Greenlandic point of view, is limited. Of course, one cannot ignore that vast numbers of myths and legends were collected in West Greenland (not to speak of the other cultural regions of the country) – most prominently by Knud RASMUSSEN (1921-25). Old myths and legends have been submitted to thorough analyses of their potential as historical sources (e.g. THISTED 2001). GULLØV has consistently invoked the concept of ethnohistory in his studies combining archaeology and oral data (1996: 95). As KLEIVAN (1991: 251) remarks, a number of books dealing with Greenlandic history, which were published after the introduction of Home Rule, have endeavoured to include more sources written by Greenlanders – but such sources are simply much less abundant than the ones emanating from Danes.

Finally, Greenlanders themselves write their own history. To quote but the most recent comprehensive attempt, the two volumes by PETERSEN (et al.), published in Greenlandic in 1987 and 1999, chronicle the history of Greenland until 1953. Judging from the Danish translation of the first (1991), this «insider's» view does not differ as much as one would have expected from what non-Greenlanders might write. In particular, the attempts of the redaction group to elicit Greenlanders' points of views, in written contributions or through interviews, were less successful than expected (KLEIVAN 1991: 254). In principle, it should not be more difficult, nor less rewarding than elsewhere in the Inuit-Yupik world, to practice oral history in Greenland. The difficulties and reluctances point to the fact that the epistemology, methods, and awareness of the field of applicability of oral history which have recently been developed in North America, have not (yet) had much impact in Greenland.

This section does not pretend to pass for an even remotely representative account of history in and of Greenland. I have only highlighted a few tendencies that may enter in a comparison with Inuit history in North America. In any case, no matter how relatively smooth relationships may be, one can feel a tension between European-style history writing, and what could be a more Greenlandic way of accounting for Greenlandic history. One may here ponder Morantz' contention, based on her experience with the Cree of Canada:

A representative integration of the two historical traditions is not generally possible unless carried out by bicultural and bilingual researchers (presumably Native). However, in attempting to merge the histories, one also runs the risk, I fear, of distorting the native historical consciousness to fit the more dominant Western historical tradition. As other elements of the Native culture have succumbed to assimilation, the indigenous perspectives and messages of history, too, would capitulate to the supremacy of Western history. (MORANTZ 1998: 71).

To conclude

The history of Inuit and Yupik is coming of age. Under the banner of *ethnohistory*, it has become more sensitive to local cultural contexts, but it still stumbles in its attempts to encompass local senses of history, and in devolving the major share of history portraying to Inuit and Yupik scholars. Despite the important differences noted above, Greenland and the rest of the North American Arctic share these challenges. In order to help overcome them, comparisons may be extended further, beyond the Inuit world towards the rest of the indigenous Arctic, and further, to the south. The exchange of experiences should no doubt be fruitful.

Résumé

Les premiers travaux sur l'histoire inuit en Amérique du Nord ne datent que de quelques décennies. Entre-temps, l'ethno-histoire a subi les mêmes influences que ses disciplines parentes, l'anthropologie et l'histoire. Récemment, les chercheurs aussi bien que les Inuit ont prôné l'approche «participative» dans la recherche, ainsi que l'inclusion de sources orales et de points de vue indigènes sur l'histoire. Ceci se reflète dans les questions contemporaines sur la «voix» et sur l'identité de l'auteur. Au Groenland par contre, l'alphabétisme et l'abondance de sources écrites réduisent la propension à récolter l'histoire orale. Partout dans l'Arctique, la tension entre les manières occidentales de présenter l'histoire, et ce que pourraient être leurs pendants inuit, demeure irrésolue. Ce survol conclut par un plaidoyer pour des approches comparatives de l'historicité et des traditions de représentation historique.

Resumen

Los primeros trabajos sobre la historia de los Inuit de América del Norte datan de algunas decenas. Entre tanto, la etnohistoria llegó a experimentar las mismas influencias que sus disciplinas parientes, la antropología y la historia. Recientemente, tanto los buscadores como los Inuit preconizan un enfoque «participativo» en la investigación, así como la inclusión de fuentes orales y de puntos de vista indígenas sobre la historia. Sin embargo en Groenlandia, el alfabetismo y la abundancia de las fuentes escritas reducen la propensión a coleccionar la historia oral. En todas partes del Arctico, la tensión entre las maneras occidentales de presentar a la historia, y lo que podrían ser sus pendants inuit, permanece irresuelta. Esta introducción del asunto se concluye por una defensa en favor de enfoques comparativos de la historicidad y de las tradiciones de representación histórica.



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