

Reliving the memories: Isuma of Canadian Arctic

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Abstract: *The struggle for independent Nunavut state reached its climax in 1999 April 1, when Nunavut as an autonomous territory was born. This was a political and to a certain extent a geographical achievement of the Inuit people. However, the real struggle had just begun in reconstructing a ravaged heritage through their language, culture and traditions. The proven way of life, which their ancestors had learnt from their ancestors was fading away rapidly. The young Inuit had lost their faith in their past, had no hope for future. At this crucial stage, Isuma started as an independent Inuit film production. Isuma means 'to think', and the tag line goes, 'young and old work together to keep our ancestors' knowledge alive'. Isuma is largely owned by Inuit community and its mission is to impart the Inuit Knowledge to the young Inuit and to the non-Inuit audience across the world.*

Orality has found film as a powerful medium of expression. The experience hitherto recorded and produced in print has found life in film rolls. The enactment, the performance as strong tools of Orality has indeed made an impression. The recent motion picture by Isuma The Journals of Knud Rasmussen recreating the trauma the great Inuit shaman underwent in a period of shifting beliefs. This is a small incident recorded by Knud Rasmussen in his narration of his Fifth Thule Expedition in 1929. Isuma has picked this particular incident to highlight many intricate things, which a proud old shaman experienced in accepting a new way of life. It is one of the very significant moments of ethnographic writing where the words of the narrator capture the essence of human pride. Isuma has succeeded in restoring the pride of the wounded Inuit Shaman. The paper attempts to analyze this very aspect to visual medium, which has proved itself successfully that it can be an extension of orality.

Key Words: *Anthropology, Ethnography, Visual Medium, Documentation, Rejuvenating Culture, Recreating life.*

“But now, “he went on, “I am a Christian, and so I have sent away all my helping spirits; sent them up to my sister in Baffin Land.”

The great Wizard Aua speaks these words to Knud Rasmussen, the renowned Danish explorer. Knud Rasmussen is the celebrated explorer and anthropologist of Arctic Canada. Rasmussen has collected his experience of traveling among the Inuit tribe of the Canadian North in his “Reports of Fifth Thule Expedition”. The work is an authentic document of the Inuit. Zacharias Kunuk, the celebrated Inuit director takes this sensitive moment of history for his acclaimed film “The Journals of Knud Rasmussen”.

It is 1922 in the Iglulik region of Canadian Arctic. Rasmussen and his party of explorers travel to the Northern most tip of Iglulik. He meets Aua a shaman and the patriarch of a large Iglulik family. The Fifth Thule Expedition was over the “Barren Grounds” of the great tracts of “untimbered land between the Hudson Bay and the Arctic Coast”. Knud Rasmussen was given the job of studying the inland Eskimos. As Rasmussen himself mentions, he was to study the spiritual side of the Eskimo culture. Aua is one of the last lines of Iglulik Inuit shamans who inhabit the Iglulik region of the Canadian Arctic. Aua was a great source of information for Knud Rasmussen. Aua was a Shaman; he was the head of a large household and was a brave hunter. Besides all these qualities, Aua and his wife Orulo were very good narrators ‘gifted with Knowledge and imagination’ who understood the importance of Knud Rasmussen’s work. Aua and his wife Orulo have given a large body of information about the spiritual aspect of the Inuit life, the taboos, the healing ritual of the Inuit, the hunting habits and many songs accompanying the famous drum dances. Many of the songs of Aua and Orulo have found place in the recent anthologies and have received great popularity.

1922 was a very crucial time in the history of the Inuit of Canada, Alaska and Greenland. The European traders of fur trade increasingly visited the Inuit and their lands. The missionaries followed the traders. The age old beliefs of the Inuit about the land and the sea, the animals and about their shamans were undergoing a crisis. A new faith was asserting itself before their eyes; a new way of life was evolving. Knud Rasmussen was a witness to this transition at that time. He has captured those moments in his famous Reports of the Fifth Thule Expedition. It was not just changing one's belief to Christianity; it was an end of a particular way of life, lived and believed in over thousands of years. That way of life had given the Inuit their meat, light and warmth in the cold and harsh surroundings of the Arctic North. Aua and Orulo had lived a complete life with many children. There were moments of happiness and hard times in his or her life as is the case with everybody. Then his helping spirits, which accompanied him everywhere, always assisted Aua. Aua's religion always looked towards life, a life of happiness and fulfillment. Once Aua mentions to Knud Rasmussen that the helping spirits accompany a human being only if he/she is happy. If the person is found to be in a continuous state of moroseness or of depression the spirits leave the person. The animals sacrifice their lives to make the human beings happy. The humans must recognize this sacrifice and try to be happy. Now Aua is sad because he is now forced to let go his helping spirits. He is now a Christian and Christianity does not believe in the helping spirits of an Inuit Shaman.

The Journals of Knud Rasmussen, a feature film directed by the acclaimed directors Kunuk Zacharia and Norman Cohn, produced by Isuma captures this historical event of the Inuit. Aua the wizard, a man who staunchly believed in the Arctic way of life accepts a new faith and a new God. Going by his new faith, he sends away his helping spirits. Aua represents the changing Inuit life, while the mourning three spirits represent the lost uncontaminated, pristine arctic environs. Both of them have changed dramatically since then. This 'docu-drama' documents various other aspects of Inuit way of life. There are two prominent female protagonists in the movie, Orulo, the wife of Aua and their insolent daughter Apak. Orulo narrates her life story as a fatherless daughter, happy wife of Aua and as a loving mother. It explains the harsh challenges of the Arctic as well as a way of life, which believes in inward happiness. She explains many festivities and song duels, which she and Aua had attended as a young couple. The music and melody of the cold north absolutely mesmerizes the viewers. She is overjoyed after her narration, realizing how happy and fulfilling her life had been. Apak her daughter has been married twice. She is the unsatisfied but the gifted daughter of Aua. Her unsatisfied love relationship pushes her to have hallucinatory sex dreams with her dead husband. She does not have love or any interest in her existing second husband. However, this is not the central issue in the movie. The principle aspect of the movie is to highlight the painful disappearance of an age-old practice of shamanism and community healing. It is a drama of the vanishing culture, tradition and joy of Aua's household. The impressive last scene where Aua bids farewell to his guiding spirits to join his fellow Christian Inuit to get the much needed provision undoubtedly makes us not just emotional; we recognize the wounded pride of Aua. In this stunning climax, we witness a cold destruction of an ancient culture. Shamanism is no more a way of understanding the unintelligible; it is Satanism according to Christianity. Aua, played by Pakak Innuksuk has made the character immortal. This last scene is no doubt dramatic. It had every reason to grow melodramatic, but the restrained acting of Pakak Innuksuk and the controlled narrative technique has made this scene most sensitive. Every viewer for a while grows humble before the ways of harsh ways of Arctic North. The director has very intelligently used the Arctic locales with minimum interference. The agony of losing one's faith in life is captured nakedly in this docu-drama. Zacharias Kunuk in the interview of the making of the Journals comments that he is doing a feature film on Inuit way of life, the taboos, which they practiced, the spirit world in which they had faith, and the shamans who connected with the spirit world. Zacharias is recreating this world for the present Inuit and to the entire world.

The Journals was shot in the traditional hunting camp of Zacharias Kunuk. The place is called Siuraajuk, where he wants to set up a 'remote media lab'. According to the plan given in the reports of Rasmussen Aua's palace is constructed. The digital video has effectively captured the harsh arctic terrain with its stark brightness accompanied by complete darkness inside igloos. The Inuit songs played in the background are beautiful and soothing. The raging snowstorm out side is incomparable to the more severe storm inside Aua's heart. Nevertheless, Aua's philosophy "All our customs come from life and turn towards life" makes him accept the new way of life. One has to have a life to achieve something. Aua's decides to live. The change is inevitable, it is bound to happen, and Aua accepts the change gracefully.

The Inuit today are settled in modern houses with all modern facilities. They are no more wandering hunter-gatherers. The Canadian Government has provided waged jobs for the Inuit. They fought for an autonomous state of Nunavut and they achieved it. Inuit to this day are bound to their land and culture. A modern Inuit might not go to a shaman for a healing session but definitely, he/she participates in the traditional way of life. They have adopted all the cutting-edge technologies from the southern region to appropriate the current need. It was because of such individuals like Apak Angilirik and Zacharia Kunuk that Inuit Broadcasting Corporation IBC was established 1982. Both of these individual visionaries had always cherished a dream of reinventing the great art of storytelling by the elders, thereby

rejuvenating the oral history of Inuit. The IBC was located in Ottawa and was not able to fund the dreams of Apak Angilirik or Zacharia Kunuk. Norman Cohn the video artist from Canada and Igloodik elder Paulosie Qulitalik started Isuma Productions in 1990. Isuma produces 'community-based filmmaking that preserves and enhances Inuit culture, creates needed employment, and offers a uniquely Inuit point of view to the global media audience'. Its essence is a unique "docu-drama" aesthetic, which brings forward the past and melds it into the present'. It is not recreating a past life; it is reliving a life, which was forgotten for a while. Norman Cohn describes this as what Inuit actors in a way relive the lives of their ancestors. Inuit artist Peter Petseolak once commented that his ancestors should have written on the sealskin. Writing gives the individual a sense of power. It also gives an individual a sense of independence. However, there is no gainsaying that it distances the individual from his socio-historical situation. Isuma, which aptly means, "to think" tries to fulfill the desire of this great Inuit artist. Petseolak tried to capture the Inuit culture in his paintings and carvings and collection of Inuit photography and Isuma is re-discovering the lost oral tradition of the Inuit. Katarina Soukup, the renowned media artist while working with Isuma in various capacities writes that the works of this nature are authentic because the Aboriginal history has always been written in a European language, which is highly academic. Isuma has taken away this privilege of the written word, as the "authentic," "true" historical records. She says, "The films do this by appropriating communication tools to transmit an audiovisual form of Inuit oral history and storytelling to a hybrid audience: Isuma's primary goal is to delight other Inuit, and its secondary goal is to connect with a global media audience."

The current project of Isuma is to develop the Internet Broadband technologies to give the world a feeling of living in the arctic. The non-profit Nunavut Broadband Development Corporation (<http://www.nunavut-broadband.ca>) has been working to make this technology affordable. Katarina Soukup feels that the broadband technology accommodates media rich content, works effectively in audio-video streaming, and it appropriates an oral culture. Besides, broadband has other practical uses such as distance education, e-learning, and e-commerce. It helps Nunavut's artists and craftspeople. A major advantage of the Internet is that of providing them with medical help.

The Inuit of Nunavut have found their expression in the visual medium. They have reinvented their oral tradition through this. This has given them a strong voice worldwide. In the recent Copenhagen Climate Conference Isuma's new project, Inuit Knowledge and Climate Change (a 15 minutes portion), was screened. The UN had sponsored a Film Festival voicing the Indigenous opinion on Climate Change. Zacharia Kunuk has definitely made a very sensitive documentary on the climate change in the Arctic region. He has taken the assistance of climate scientist Ian Mauro and Siila Watt-Cloutrie, the Inuit activist and former international chair of the Inuit Circumpolar Council for this film. The film documents the climate change in the Arctic, and its effects on the Native population. The Isuma TV telecast this ongoing project online. One can view unedited footage from the film. This project is truly a community activity. It has taken up an issue, which has a global concern. The Inuit way of life had always been consistent. It was completely and integrally dependent on Nature. Through Isuma, the Inuit are able to voice their concern about Climate Change. "When the time came a few years ago to find an Inuktitut term for the word "Internet," Nunavut's former Official Languages Commissioner, Eva Aariak, chose *ikiaqqivik*, or "traveling through layers" (Minogue, 2005, n.p.). The word comes from the concept describing what a shaman does when asked to find out about living or deceased relatives or where animals have disappeared to: travel across time and space to find answers."

Peter Petseolak the artist tried to capture the Arctic moments through photography. He was anxious that his ancestral way of life is fast changing. During the decades of relocation i-e in 1950-60, many Inuit were removed from their traditional habitat to the southern part of Canada. Many of the children were made to live in hostels. These children lost their language, culture and tradition. Many elders became very anxious about these changes in younger generation. There were conscious attempts to teach them the 'Inuitness', through textbooks, weekend camps and summer camps. Many of the elders made a very serious attempt to speak to youngsters only in Inuktitut. The primary level of education was done in Inuktitut. However, many of these aspects were meant to be taught in the field. The younger generation of the Inuit had lost the privilege of wandering on the harsh terrain and learn from once own experience. This 'self-learning' had given the Inuit their pride and confidence. Today's younger Inuit lack this self-esteem. This is evident in the increased suicide rates among the young Inuit. This was the challenge before the new Nunavut Government and the elders who struggled for autonomous state.

When a community has the rich knowledge of survival in the harshest climate, it should be properly recognized. This knowledge needs to be explored and literacy is not always a best tool. Many a times it becomes a constraint for free expression. When the aural and visual narratives of the illiterate are very powerful it needed to be expressed in audio and video format. In Isuma 'young and old work together to keep the ancestor's knowledge alive'. Isuma's aim is to provide young Inuit a creative avenue to mark their distinct 'Inuitness'.

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