

“They’re going to come back”¹

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Introduction

I come from Rankin Inlet. I was born in a place called Pelly Bay (Fig. 1), but the real name is Arviligjuaq, which means “place with lots of bowhead whales.” I belong to the Netsilingmiut, People of the Seal. Seal is very important to us. But it gets cold up there, so tuktu (caribou) was very important for clothing for my people. Without the tuktu, people would not have survived in the very harsh climate where I come from.

I come from a matriarchal society. My great-grandmother was very strong woman. She made sure that all of her kids and grandkids respected the skills of the woman and the knowledge of the woman. My great-grandfather had a sense of humour. When he was asked if he was going to do something, he always said, “I’ve got to check with the boss first.” That’s how strong my great-grandmother was. She stood up to Stuart Hodgson. At that time Stuart Hodgson was Commissioner of the Northwest Territories (which included what is now Nunavut Territory), telling the people up in Pelly Bay to move to somewhere else where it’s cheaper. My great-grandmother stood up to the government, and now that community has thrived.

Our people kept their traditional ways alive for a long time. It wasn’t until about a hundred years ago that Netsilingmiut had contact with outsiders. A hundred years is not a long time. Knut Rasmussen was one of the first outsiders that they met, in the 1920s.

I want to share just one story about the tuktu. I come from a large family and I was the oldest. My mom was the oldest in her family. My grandmother was the oldest in her family. I barely missed my great-grandmother making kids, but I remember quite clearly when my grandmother was making kids. I have uncles that are younger than me. So every month it seemed like there was a little baby coming out from somebody.

I guess it was because I was the eldest, I became the gopher for my great-grandfather. My uncles knew that this kid could be told what to do. So I was told what to do a lot. But I didn’t mind, because I was learning a lot from my grandfather and my uncles. One time in the early 1970s, being young and naive and not knowing any better, we were seal hunting in the spring time by canoe. We went up to the top of a little island, about maybe two hundred feet up. He wanted to go check out where he could safely travel, because there was still broken ice around there. We came out on top of this hill, and there was an old cache.

When I saw the cache I started laughing, thinking somebody must have been very stupid. My grandfather said, “What’s wrong?” I told him, “Somebody’s stupid. They dragged a seal all the way up here, two hundred feet up, and buried this seal.” I was still laughing. But he said, “No, that’s not for seal. Many generations ago there were lots of tuktu here.” I thought to myself, “Yeah, right, Grandfather. We have to go hundreds of miles to catch tuktu.” At that time I would go hunting with my grandfather and my dad towards Baker Lake for days on end, and we were lucky to get tuktu. We were lucky to get two.

¹ This paper was adapted from contributions by Gabriel Nirlungayuk, the Nunavut Tunngavik Inc. delegate to the NACW Aboriginal Talking Circle.

We were really lucky if we got five. So we had to go far to catch tuktu.

Then my grandfather said, "They're going to come back." In my mind I was thinking, "That crazy old man doesn't know what he's thinking. He's getting too old." But sure enough a few years later, before my grandfather died, it was October and we were fishing, and I saw smoke or fog up there. All the men were busy fishing. I looked again, and there was smoke or fog. The river was freezing up, so there was supposed to be no river up there. So I said, "Grandfather, there's smoke up there." When I said that, the men started looking up and took out their binoculars. I noticed they were getting excited. They shared the few binoculars that they had. "Tuktu, tuktu!" they said. "Lots of tuktu!" I saw it first, so my grandfather told me, "You're a man now, you saw it first." So I was a big man. I was just a kid, but he made me a man, he was so proud of me seeing that tuktu first. That day we caught many tuktu, at least five per person, and there were twenty of us.

At first I struggled cutting up tuktu. I didn't know how, but I tried. Then my grandfather said, "You'll learn soon enough. It will just take you some time." That's my little story about tuktu.

Up in Nunavut we're going through a lot of changes. It disheartens me to hear what people are going through with the impacts on tuktu and on the land from my southern First Nation friends. We're very lucky up in Nunavut. We're not too concerned about the tuktu. But there are a lot of pressures from the mining companies. We have very large uranium deposits right in the calving grounds of the Beverly-Qamanirjuaq herd near Baker Lake. The Bathurst and Bluenose East herds go right up on the west side of our territory, and we hunt them. And up in the High Arctic is the Peary herd. So like my First Nation friends, tuktu is very important to us.



Fig. 1. The author's son and caribou herd outside of Rankin Inlet. Credit: Gabriel Nirlungayuk.

We have an agreement between our Government of Nunavut that we have to go towards *Aajiiqatigiing-niq*, consensus decision-making. We have to discuss what we're planning to do. The government cannot do it on their own. They know it, and we know it. We cannot do it on our own either, so we have to collaborate between the hunters and the government. Some of the concerns are exploration camps, helicopters going back and forth. As we've heard from other speakers in the Aboriginal Talking Circle, there are lots of fast machines now that affect our impact on the herds.

The elders tell us that when tuktu start coming from the tree line, don't hunt the first ones. Let the leaders go past, so that the herd will reach other people further north. Then hunt the late ones. We're starting to hear that from our elders. The elders also tell us to use everything. Don't leave carcasses. If you're going to leave some of the food, you have to cache it so you can go back to it. There's a big push up in Nunavut now to make the clothing. It is very inexpensive, but it takes skill. So there's a push now for young women to learn the skills. We both need each other, women and men.

Quyanami, thank you.