
Three Inuit Women Speak

Surviving Is What Counts

CARMEN, LOIE and NOOTURA
in Conversation with KRISTIN COLWELL

The material for this article was gathered during many evenings of conversation and discussion with three Inuit women with whom I have been working in the Eastern Arctic since the Fall of 1988. We talked about their lives, their traditions and their concerns for their families. Now in their early thirties, they are enrolled in the Early Childhood Education program at Arctic College in Iqaluit, formerly Frobisher Bay. They are members of the first class to train as daycare staff in the North West Territories.

These sessions revealed the extraordinary transition of their culture which has occurred over the last fifty years and which has had a profound impact on the course of their lives. My role was that of questioning and clarifying to insure that I understood what they were telling me. Because I am also their instructor and we see each other every day, our relationships evolved in significant ways. The works of anthropologists and others who have written about the North were extremely useful in providing a larger framework in which to place our discussion.

I present this piece with humility and would like to stress that the women's statements and my understanding represent the mood and awareness of the moment.

Carmen and Loie each come from small settlements. Nootura has lived most of her life in Iqaluit. Loie is married, Carmen is a widow and Nootura is separated from her husband. Each has several children. They all were born at a time when their families still lived in the traditional way on the land in tents, igloos, sod houses. Loie describes her life: "My name is Loie Mike. I'm

from Pangnirtung, I'm thirty years old. I have three children, one adopted and two of my own. I have been married for ten years. In that time I have experienced life that most other women have gone through, but in a different, isolated part of the world — the Arctic. I was born right on the Arctic Circle in a qamaq. My parents lived in igloos and skin tents, but that was before I was born. Our qamaq was made of canvas, sod and moss. The moss serves as insulation and is picked right off the land in the month of August. It's light and good and you put it between the sheets of canvas. The shape is like a house with an arched top, but it's one big space, an oblong shape. Half of it is a floor area and the other the bed area and around the sides are low counters like footstools for stuff or sitting. There are shelves all around and the walls are covered with paper, any old paper. They glued it with flour and water. They had paper even then!"

Nootura, who was the oldest of eight children born at the mouth of Frobisher Bay, lived in similar circumstances on the land. "We lived in a hut. There were three families. My parents, my mother's sister and her husband and another family. I was always with my grandmother, because she never wanted me to follow my parents. We stayed in camp when they went hunting overnight. I can only remember bits and pieces, but I have good memories, no bad feelings. I can't remember ever being upset; just playing and being told to leave the lamp alone. It was hanging in the middle from the ceiling a kerosene lamp, quite low. My mother was always sewing. I was not to make it swing or get in her light."

Carmen, who was born in an igloo, recalls some of her

childhood memories. "My brothers took me on dog team rides. It was one of the nicest experiences I had. I had caribou clothes, sitting on top of the komatiq, wrapped in skins. We camped in igloos that had been built by others. You would not stop in isolated areas, only if you needed to. You would only stop in familiar places. I was tied in a sleeping bag on top of the komatiq. It was beautiful — I would always fall asleep.

When I was older we used to have dances. All my sisters played accordion and we would have dances in my sister's house, the whole community would come. It was such a good time." It is interesting to note that the music played were Scottish reels, learned generations before from the whalers.

Each of their families left the traditional life on the land. For Carmen, it seems her mother's death, when she was five, led her father to take on employment and permanent residence in Rankin Inlet. Loie recalls her family's move: "In 1966 there was an epidemic of diseases going around in the dogs and people. Polio, diphtheria, mumps, everything. I didn't know what the disease of the dogs was, but it was very similar to what the dogs have now (distemper): runny noses, discharge, puss coming out of their ears, eyes, noses. I watched my dogs die. One was the lead dog of my father, a perfect dog, and one day he got so sick and the whole team went after that and then everyone... It must have been very bad to the point where we had to be moved by airplane."

Her recollections of settling in Pangnirtung are imbued with her consciousness of the consequences of the relocation. The family settled permanently in the hamlet, lived in government housing, received welfare.

"It was awful! Not awful, but so different. I call it awful because it wasn't the way I wanted it to be. When I talk to older people, the way they lived is heaven to me. Paradise!!!

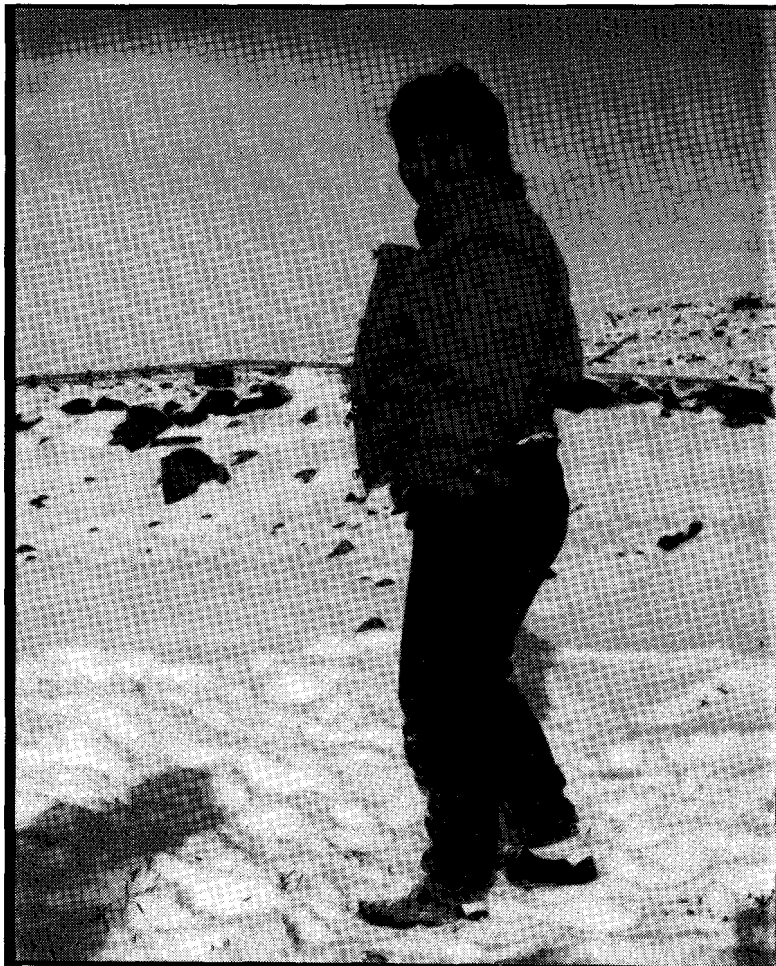
Then on the land it was like you had everything then and there. You had a purpose, no matter what kind of life you had, you had a purpose in that camp... You grow old in that camp, you'd be like an encyclopedia to the people, you'd pass that on while they are growing up. Nowadays we have to survive and get it from books, which means like burning your brains!.... That's my generalization of education. I'm sitting down using my brain... Now you can't be who you want to be unless you pass a certain point in the books. But if you are living in my time, in my way of life, your point of living is today, just today. There is no tomorrow. I don't have to go to a certain area to get an education. I don't have to go do a certain thing, go to a certain place to get a certain piece of paper to recognize that I can do things for people."

All three women repeatedly expressed regret and pain at the passing of their parents' traditional ways. Loie: "You don't know how fast the North grew up. Triple fast!" Their ancestors' precarious but highly adaptive way of life has been

replaced within the last generation by increasing dependence on goods and services which must be provided from southern Canada. Of course many hardships and the relentless struggle for physical survival have been lifted, but in their place seems to have come a new, equal struggle, one from which the Inuit are emerging a very changed people. We spoke at length about how each of them felt about the changes which were occurring in their communities. Carmen: "I'd like my kids to be able to hunt seal and caribou, to know old ways, to continue the sharing and giving in the community. But if I took my kids out to live on the land for any length of time they would complain and want their music and TV, their friends. They'd be bored and would want to go home... knowing that really hurts." Loie: "We have no choice we can't go back. If I had to live like we used to it would be a slow suicide. I can talk and romanticize about all this, but if we were to live on the land we would not survive; we've lost our skills. My mother knows how to do it, but I know only 1% of it... My real identity as

an Inuk is not being practised any more." Nootura recounts one of the times when dramatic changes took place in her family. "In early 1960's my dad had TB. He went away for a year and a half and in that time the dogs had to be killed, as there was no hunter at home to get food for them. I remember one day my aunt went to the place where the dogs were tied up and she killed them. That must have been very painful and hard to do."

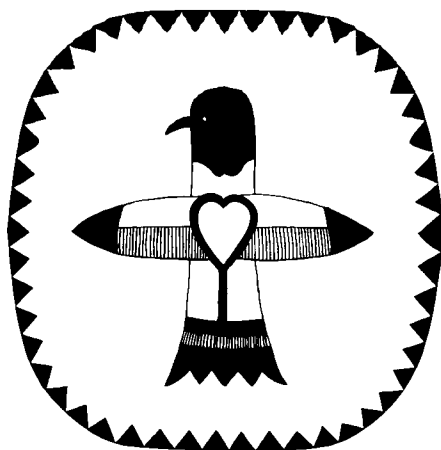
We talked about the ways in which the government had required all children to attend school, compelling families to settle in communities for ten months of the year. Nootura: "I remember when we were moving from camp to Apex. We were in nataanaqs, which are like a canoe, but much bigger. Next time I remember we were living in a tent along the shore line in Apex. Then later we moved to a two-



bedroom house with my aunt, my grandmother and four children. The house seemed very big. Then my dad started going to work for the day. Shortly after that I was put in school along with other children. I remember we were told to stand along the board and say our name. This was on the first day. I guess we were going every school day after that. There used to be two students walking through town ringing this school bell to let the children know it was school time."

I asked what anger and resentment they felt because of the intrusive nature of the *kablunaat* (white people) on their way of life. Loie: "It is so bad for us. It hurts your sense of pride, your dignity, your livelihood. I can relate to those students (International Youth for Peace and Justice tour) who came and talked about the troubles in their countries (Nicaragua, Namibia). The same anger is within us, but we are controlling it because as far as our government is concerned, we have a lot more faith. The resentment, the anger, hurt, pain, confusion is right here, but it is inward. We as Inuit have been brought up to control our anger and hardship. It is considered impolite and rude to do otherwise. You internalize your hurt, you don't fight back — you accept your lot." Loie goes on to explain: "I often ask my mother: 'How do you feel? Here I am so much more advanced in terms of today's pace. You don't know any English and yet you live so well!!?' And my mother says: 'What you learn today is for tomorrow. No matter what I am going through. I'm doing it minute by minute and if I make a mistake, tough! I can talk about it, cry about it but it's still tough. When you were being born out of me I had no choice but to let you out. No matter how bad the pain, I had to let you out. That's the pain I'm talking about. I have to go through it to survive. Surviving is what counts.'"

Adapting to changing conditions, tolerating hardship, and enduring the blows of fate, these have been Inuit ways for thousands of years. What is a recent phenomenon is the loss of independence. The newly imposed



monied economy has contributed to the profound disturbance of Inuit family life. Traditional roles and tasks have ceased to be practicable, but there is not the employment which would provide daily structure and income. Frustration and idleness are relieved in various forms of abuse. Carmen tells of her experiences: "As a teenager I was so hard! I was trying to protect myself. The Bay was selling beer from 4:00 to 5:00 every day and guys, men, would get my father drunk and they would come after me. I was so angry, I used to fight back. And after I got married, it was the same thing. In the later years of my marriage it was... what can I say... hell!

Really, that's how it was. I could not even press charges. If my husband beat me up and I'd call, the RCMP wouldn't do anything. We didn't have any rights then. Now there is a place for battered wives, but then we had to stick with it. I couldn't run away because I wasn't working. I had four kids. Even if you went somewhere

for help, people would say maybe you deserved it. I couldn't go home because my mother was dead and my father was an alcoholic.

I thought I was going to live like this forever. After my husband committed suicide — that's six years go — even though no one was beating me up, inside I was really hurting. I couldn't let go. Finally this summer I was in Pond Inlet. I talked with this guy. I realized I had to put myself first. That was the time I could hear this voice inside me saying: 'Carmen, do you love yourself?' and I said: 'NO!' Every time I could hear the voice: 'Carmen, do you love yourself?' and when I finally said yes... oh the crying, I just could not stop. Since then things have gone better. People even say: 'Carmen, you look five years younger.' Would you believe that?!"

Late in August last year when they returned from being on the land, advertisements for the first daycare course in the Arctic appeared in the newspapers. For each of them it was the right challenge. Nootura's previous work with children had led her to recognize her abilities. Carmen was looking for "a change in life, to discipline myself." And Loie, who had long been aware of her community's need for daycare, calls it: "the finishing part of my goal — my dream."

These women are of the last generation to have tangible experience of the old ways. They know that it is up to them to transmit to the next generation the things which they care about most — their language, customs, values. They also have a clear grasp of being an Inuk in this century and are prepared to use and adapt modern institutions to contribute in very positive ways to their cultural survival.



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