Elizabeth
An Elder Inuk Remembers Her Life

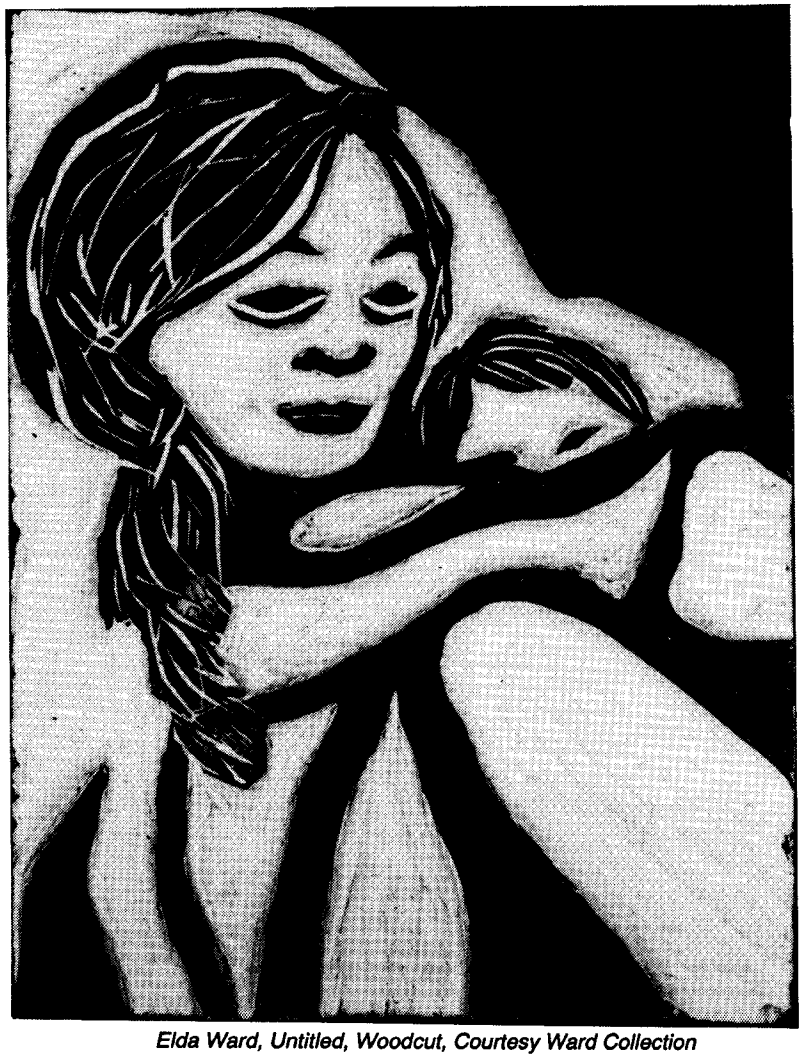
by Kathleen Mary Minor

Dans cet article, l'auteure analyse la conversation qu'elle a eue avec une femme Inuk du troisième âge. L'emphase est mise sur le rôle des ainé(e)s concernant l'infanticide des filles.

The name of the informant has been changed. This story took place in Arvilinghaurmiut, which is in the Pelly Bay area of Kitikmeot, in the Canadian Arctic.

I first went to the Canadian Arctic in November 1972. It was my intention to remain there for about a year and then move on. I left over ten years later and I still miss the friendships, loyalties, and sheer excitement of living in amidst the homeland of the Canadian Inuit. Through my work in the Arctic I enjoyed conversations with many Inuit, particularly the elderly. One such conversation took place on June 23, 1978.

I had heard of Old Elizabeth, an Elder Inuk,[1] but thought she had died several years previously. I was mistaken, though, and on June 23, 1978 while I was staying in a particular settlement, Elizabeth's grandson and his partner came to retrieve me. "Elizabeth wishes to speak with you." Needless to say, I was surprised. I thought I knew everyone in this settlement. I considered it a great honour that one so respected throughout Kitikmeot[2] would even consider having a conversation with me.



Elda Ward, Untitled, Woodcut, Courtesy Ward Collection
Photo: Yukon Government

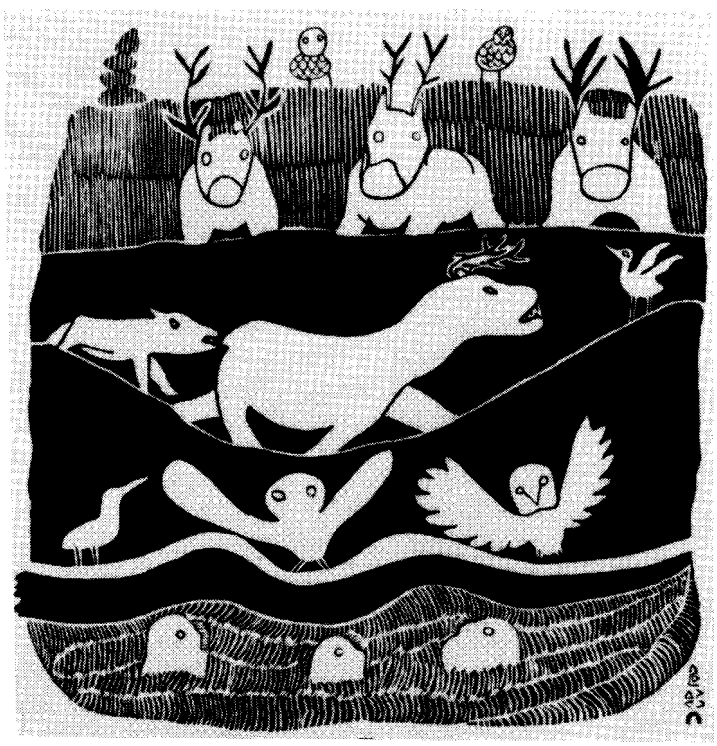
Her grandson took me to the home of his father. I was invited into a small bedroom, simple and full of light. Sitting up in the bed was Old Elizabeth. Elizabeth, one of the oldest Inuit alive, was about 89 years old. She welcomed me to her home and quietly dismissed her grandson, but asked his partner to stay and interpret because as she said in Inuktitut "this is women's talk and men do not understand."[3]

She told me she had heard that I was a writer and not just a social worker. She knew many people trusted me and she wanted me to write her story. I promised Elizabeth that I would ensure that those who read her thoughts and words would be sensitive to the pains and struggles which women endure, regardless of age or race.

Old Elizabeth began her story by showing me the tattoos on her arms, explaining how the tattoos were a sign of beauty when she was a young girl. She had many beautiful tattoos.

Patiently, she told me stories of her youth. She told me of the first *kablunaq,*[4] they called him Kapitaq. His brother was Nakoonauq, the cross-eyed one, she explained with a twinkle in her old eyes. These were the first non-Inuit persons she had ever met. She told me how her mother cared for the brothers as they were without family and far from their homeland. The Inuit felt pity for these men who "must have been so shy that they did not know how to hunt or fish. They were so pitiful." She told me of the first Hudson's Bay man in Mattuq. "He was a tall man who once whaled the Hudson's Bay coast." Elizabeth also told me many things about these men and of Knut Rasmussen.[6] Elizabeth wanted to make sure white people understood that the Inuit were caring for these men because they were new to this land of the Inuit, and these tall, muscular men did not know how to live, much less survive. They were helpless against the extremes of the Arctic. It was with kindness that the Arvilinghaurmiut[5] helped "these poor unfortunate creatures."

This information is very important because history books have been inaccurate, particularly in regards to Knut Rasmussen, whom it is noted in several accounts, was kidnapped by the Arvilinghuarmiut. The information which Elizabeth gave, and which was later submitted to the Archives in Ottawa, and to the government of the Northwest Territories, was that Knut Rasmussen was, in fact, not kidnapped. Rather, he



Pitseolak Ashoona, "People I Know," Stonecut, 1972. Courtesy Ward Collection. Photo: Yukon Government. Reproduced with permission West Baffin Eskimo Coop. Ltd.

was extremely ill and the Inuit looked after him for a full winter season. They fed him, cared for him, provided him with shelter, so he could regain his strength and continue upon his journeys.

She spoke to me of her first husband whom she loved with all the tenderness of youth. As was the custom, the young couple lived in the home of the husband's parents. Her husband's mother did not care for Elizabeth and cast her out from their igloo. Her husband had gone hunting. He was gone for many months and thus, he had no idea that Elizabeth had been cast out. She walked aimlessly across the tundra until another group of Inuit found her and took her into their camp. It was at this time that Elizabeth met her second husband. Elizabeth looked at me, her eyes bright and shining, and said: "I was a good partner and bore many children."

Elizabeth spoke with me about the customs of the people in her area of the Arctic. Her eyes grew solemn and distant. I remember the pain on her face. It was custom that if the first child was a girl, that child must be put out on the ice. I knew this custom. She asked, "Do you understand?" I said "No." She looked at me for a long time. There was a calm silence. The kind of silence that is both soothing and frightening; the silence of the Arctic, and of the Inuit, and of those whom they choose to allow in. She explained:

As parents grew old they must have a hunter to hunt for them. Otherwise, they will die. The men were hunters. The first child should always be a boy so that as he grew to be a hunter and as the parents grew older, he could always hunt for them. He could always provide them with food. He could always build igloos. In the summer he could build their tent. These were his responsibilities.

I said nothing. I just listened to what Elizabeth had to say. She was silent for a very long time. After a while, she looked at me and looked at me and with an incredible sadness said:

My first five children were girls. Each daughter was born in the early spring when the ice was still upon the sea. [Her husband] took each daughter before [Elizabeth] could even set eyes upon the child. He put each child on the ice to die in the freezing waters.

There were no tears in Elizabeth's eyes. She looked so far away. Looking up at me she added: "I have named each daughter and they are with me to this day in my heart and they are my spirit."

There was a long silence before Old Elizabeth began to speak again.

Her sixth child was a boy. He was taught to hunt, to fish, and to build igloos. She gave birth to more children and some were daughters. She taught her daughters to hunt, to fish, and to build igloos. She taught them to teach all of their children and their grandchildren to hunt and to fish so that they would learn new ways and would be respected for their skills.

Elizabeth told me how she talked to many women. She said: "We often do things just because that's the way it's done but things had to change." And changes began, and continue...

Old Elizabeth changed life in this part of the Arctic for her daughters. The main change that Elizabeth made was the recognition of equality between genders. Elizabeth questioned why things were done. She encouraged others, both women and men to question. Most critically, Elizabeth encouraged dialogue. It took this one terribly strong woman to stand up and say we will not do this to our daughters anymore.

As I traveled throughout this area of the Arctic, I met many elderly women. Often, I would speak of Elizabeth. They all said that Elizabeth changed life for all Inuit of that area, but she suffered immensely in her struggle. I left Elizabeth's home that day with an absolute empathy for her and some understanding of the pain which she suffered. I also began to understand how culture and traditions become a part of our lives without being questioned. I marveled at

Elizabeth's strength to stand up to a whole culture throughout this part of the Arctic, and say, "No we do not need to do this and we will not do it anymore. This is not right."

That evening I went for a walk in the midnight sun in this small Arctic settlement. I walked along until the early hours of the morning. It was silent and calm. In this calmness, I thought about the pains the grandmothers and the mothers have suffered so that their daughters will not.

And of course, I thought of Old Elizabeth...

Old one, the stories you must
have, hidden deep within.
The ways you have lived, the
wonders and magic you have
known.
So long ago it once was, the
wisdom learned from mothers and grandmothers, that
gave the strengths to you, your
sisters and daughters.
The ways of your fathers and
grandfathers you have known,
and lived.
And now, you lie upon a Hudson's Bay bed,
in a house of wood,
away from all that you knew, the
magic and the wonders;
and you lay there patiently, trustingly you wait to die...
ajurnarmat...

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[1]Inuktitut is the language of the peoples of the Canadian Arctic. Inuk denotes one person, Inuuk is two persons, and Inuit more than two persons. Inuktitut is not a gender-biased language.

[2]Kitikmeot is Inuktitut for the area known as the Central Arctic of Canada.

[3]This quotation and those following are interpreted from Inuktitut.

[4]Inuktitut for white person.

[5]The people of the Pelly Bay area of the Canadian Arctic.

[6]Knut Rasmussen was a famous Arctic explorer. Knut was Danish and Greenlandic Inuk and thus spoke a dialect of the Arvilinghaurmiut. Knunt was among the first to record the lives and activities of the Arvilinghaurmiut. In 1908, he published *The People of the Polar North* and in 1920, *Greenland by the Polar Sea.* Both are considered classics of Arctic history.