

## ILAGIINNIQ INUTTIGUT (BEING FAMILY AS INUIT)

It is so very nice to be here at the ICC General Assembly in Utqiagvik and I am very happy to be with you all, my international family.

It is especially exciting to be back here in Utqiagvik after so many years. As an ICC council member in the early 1990s, I had the privilege to travel here for meetings. One particular memory stays with me from those times, being a part of the community when they landed a bowhead onto the ice flow.

In 2013, a very important consultation was carried out with Nunavik Inuit. Nunavik, Quebec in Canada is a vast region situated above the 55<sup>th</sup> parallel. This consultation was done jointly by Makivik Corporation, Kativik School Board, Kativik Regional Government, Nunavik Landholding Corporations Association, Saputiit Youth Association, Nunavik Regional Board of Health and Social Services and the Avataq Cultural Institute. A report called Parnasimautik came out of that consultation and I will be sharing much of the Family content from this report with you today.

Although much of what I will be sharing is in reference to what we learned from the consultation in my home region of Nunavik, I believe many of the same thoughts, realities and concerns reflect the rest of our fellow Inuit across Canada, maybe even across our circumpolar countries.

The importance of family in Inuit social, economic and political life is often mentioned during events where Inuit culture is being discussed. Its significance brings nods of understanding from fellow Inuit when someone mentions *ilagiinniq*, being family. As Inuit, family is important to all of us. Yet what does, *ilagiinniq*, being family mean to us as Inuit? How do we recognize our own family, the bonds created within the family? What are the things that keep the family, a family?

During the consultation discussions, many different perspectives were brought forth from specific groups such as elders, youth, women and men's associations. *Ilagininniq* was mentioned by all different groups and individuals and included parenting and the intergenerational gap. These bring the need to recapture Inuit family values and to address bringing back a healthy Inuit family to the everyday. The challenges of today are due to extreme societal changes such as living in large communities,

communication technology like internet and television and travel. Inuit family values need to be re-defined without neglecting the fundamental values making up the Inuit family.

Various historical events over the past decades have impacted the traditional Inuit family. As a result the importance of family in our culture is deteriorating; the family social fabric is unravelling and this MUST be addressed.

These historical events that negatively impacted the traditional Inuit family structure includes (but are not limited to) the formal education systems and residential schools, forced relocations, medical changes and the dog slaughter.

- Forced Relocation – from the 1930's to the early 50's the Federal Government's role in relocating Inuit from their homelands to different lands that they were not accustomed to had major negative impacts on many families. The displacement of families from Nunavik to the high Arctic in Nunavut had serious effects on those relocated and their relatives who were left behind.
- Education and Residential Schools - Residential Schools were most damaging and their legacy effectively removed the responsibilities of Inuit parents to their children and has affected survivors in very damaging ways. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission published a report in 2012 titled They Came for the Children, and it states:

*Residential schools disrupted families and communities. They prevented the elders from teaching children long-valued cultural and spiritual traditions and practices. They helped kill languages. These were not side effects of a well-intentioned system: the purpose of the residential school system was to separate children from the influences of their parents and their community so as to destroy their culture. The impact was devastating. Countless students emerged from those schools as lost souls, their lives soon to be cut by drugs, alcohol and violence.*

- Medical Changes - This imposed new lifestyle not only has impacted ilagiinniq but also the introduction of diseases has had major impacts on Inuit. Hundreds of Inuit men, women and children were removed from their families to go to sanatoriums during the tuberculosis epidemic in

the 1940s up to the 1960s. Hundreds of deaths had a profound effect on those who lost loved ones.

Even childbirth, something that should be a very happy event within a family, was turned into a challenge for young Inuit families beginning in the 1960s. Pregnant women were sent away from their home and communities to give birth at hospitals sometimes thousands of kilometers away adding new stress to the family unit, as fathers struggled to care for their children and were unable at times to go out and harvest food.

- Dog Slaughter - According to approximately 200 reports made by Nunavik Inuit, a series of dog slaughters were undertaken or ordered to be undertaken by Canada and Quebec government officials or their representatives in several Nunavik communities from the mid-1950s until the late 1960s. The slaughtering of sled dogs contributed to the breakdown of families as well. Men were deprived of their role as providers of their families and this has negatively affected the lives of men as head of their family.

It is important to talk about this historical context, these traumatic events, and the consequent social problems to better understand why many problems within families and communities continue to be experienced and must be addressed. It is by understanding our history, that we can be in a better position to move forward. We cannot continue to dwell on being victims.

Intergenerational traumas are affecting Inuit in ways that are extremely detrimental to the very essence of ilagiinniq, being family but while intergenerational trauma is a fact of life for many, if not all Inuit, we as a people have survived because we also have intergenerational resilience and wisdom. Not just surviving but thriving in the harshest environment has enabled us to be here today, and will continue to do so.

Ilagiit is often mentioned by Inuit as an important value. It translates to being part of a family that goes beyond father, mother and children, and includes the extended family. Our concept of family is what sets us apart from non-Inuit, because the Inuit family is unique. Growing up in an Inuit family, a sense of belonging is achieved through learning how we should call each of our relatives through tursurautiniq. Tursurautiniq means how kinship terms are used by kin.

The wisdom and resilience as a people come from our traditional Inuit way, values and customs which include: kinship, tursurautiit, sanaji/arnaqutik, saunik and Imminirsuqatigiinniq to name just a few.

- Kinship is an Inuit value traditionally learned at an early age so the child grows into his family and community and his identity is forged. Pauktuutit, the national organization of Inuit women of Canada describes kinship as bonds that are established at birth, through marriage and adoption, and by sharing the name of someone. In their 2006 Guide to Inuit culture, *The Inuit Way*, they state “*These bonds ensured that virtually all people in the camp were related to each other in some way. Combined with an intricate system of reciprocal obligations and responsibilities, the community was tightly knit and interdependent.*” These relations were part of Inuit identity and it brought with it the responsibilities towards the community.
- Sanaji or arnaqutik was the one who cut the umbilical cord when a child was born. That person accompanied the child during his/her childhood and encouraged the child at each milestone of his/her life. A young boy, an angusiak would bring his first catch to his arnaqutik and the young girl, arnaliak would bring her first sewing project to her sanaji. These children were made to be proud of who they were through these rituals and such markers of Inuit identity have weakened. In today’s practices, one may still have a sanaji/arnaqutik but the practices now have less meaning for some.
- Saunik when a child is born, they are given the name of another person who becomes their saunik, namesake. The child carries the kinship links of their saunik and the bonds created through this naming system are also losing strength as much as the practice of remembering kinship terms.
- Imminirsuqatigiinniq (the harmony of interdependence). It brings forth the importance of everyone working together to find solutions.

It is vital that these teachings about kinship and family bonds are strengthened and revitalized. Living in larger communities and the influence of Western culture is a reality but we must and will keep our Inuit identity.

Families need to be encouraged to keep teaching their families our traditional values and customs. Many of the social problems in our communities can be lessened by going back to our traditional teachings of

imminirsuqatigiinniq (harmony of interdependence). The communication that facilitated the passing on of knowledge in which families knew their responsibilities for their relations needs to be revitalized.

To move forward, reviving, reinforcing and practicing the Inuit family traditions and core values are the foundation for improving the quality of life for Inuit and they must be maintained. Change must be rooted in the community and supported by services designed and delivered by Inuit.

It's important more than ever that parents and leaders at all levels need to become real-life role models for youth and instill pride in being Inuit, the strength to persevere and the confidence to succeed. Our youth are the new leaders and we must encourage them and support them to take on this responsibility. Building community, family and individual strength is essential so that communities and Inuit have a stronger sense of independence and autonomy. Strong proactive leadership is one of the keys to success and well-being of our communities.

As responsible people, we must recapture our core family values and traditions. This is the only way we can confidently adapt them to our ever changing socio-economic situations. Family defines us. Without these core values and traditions intact, our children will flounder. We need to step back, clearly articulate these and apply them to all aspects of our personal and professional lives.

I quote from one of the Parnasimautik workshops in 2013: "We have survived many dramatic experiences, residential schools, diseases, dog slaughters, big challenges and so on. But we still have strength. We have a lot of work ahead."