



Commentary on Kangiqsujaq film

By Bernard Saladin d'Anglure

In the early 1960s, Inuit life was very much dependent on their means of transport, especially in the Kangiqsujaq region. The Inuit in that area lived a nomadic life in a vast and extremely varied territory composed of coastal islands and shorelines with sheer cliffs, and so they traveled mainly on foot, by dog sled, with porter dogs carrying packs, or by kayak. In earlier times, and up until the 1930s, they had also had the *umiaq* – a large boat made of skins. *Umiat* were used in summer and could transport thirty or forty people, along with their dogs and sleds. Later, they acquired wooden boats that resembled lifeboats somewhat. There was a period between the two World Wars when fox skins sold for incredible prices, and so a few heads of families were able to acquire Peterhead boats – much larger boats – but that period was followed by an economic crisis and so they returned to traditional ways, to the kayaks, the dog sleds and the porter dogs. And then in the space of a few years, all that disappeared. I would say that in the space of 10 years, with the coming of settlement, the dogs disappeared, and they only reappeared in the last twenty years with the dog sled races, when the Inuit started raising dogs again.

I mention dogs because they played such a big role. Each family member owned one or more dogs, and so when a hunter hitched up his sled with, say, a dozen dogs for a heavier move, the team was made up of dogs belonging to all the members of his family. The dog team was a sort of family gathering. Each dog had a name, and the children often owned their dogs starting as infants, with the dog given a name that was the reverse of its owner's name. So for example if someone was called Innaarulik like the island that 'has a cliff' – the name of an Inuit I knew who is still alive – then the dog was named the reverse, 'it has flat ground.' So this was done with humour, but also everyone knew that when they called the dog, it was the owner that was being addressed, through the dog. And often these very young dogs were permitted to enter the igloos or the tents along with their owners, whereas otherwise this was forbidden; the dogs had to wait to be fed outside.

And then there were the kayaks, valuable tools that in the spring were tied to the dogsleds when the people set out hunting for marine mammals, ringed seals and bearded seals, at the edge of the icepack.





So this is a moving day. We can see the sled is heavily loaded, with a dozen dogs to pull it. And this was the usual speed on the pack ice, not very fast, but they could cover hundreds of kilometers like that when they had to. These tents are made of canvas, they had already abandoned the skin tents, but the canvas tents were almost the same design, just not as heavy. They secured them with some rocks around the bottom for attaching turnbuckles, and a few stakes. And when they were ready to move on, the tent could be taken down within thirty minutes, and another half hour for packing up everything and tying it to the sled, with everyone pitching in. The dogs stayed close, ready to be harnessed if they were not already harnessed, and the kids were having fun, whether they were helping or just hoping to help, like this little fellow.

Once they arrived at camp and were waiting to head out to stalk game, the hunters would occupy their downtime carving, like this hunter we see here; I acquired that very sculpture he is carving, they came to me to suggest it, and what is interesting is that several members of the family took part in carving it. It wasn't the man we see here who offered it to me, it was his uncle, and they had to share the small sum I gave him.

And so they watched out for marine mammals in these places along the shore that stood a little higher. At that time, belugas were their main prey. Belugas migrate in the spring when the ice has melted, and come very close to the shore and into the bays; they tend to follow the coastline to some well-placed locations. Here, a beluga has been fatally wounded, and they had to put the kayakers in to go retrieve it. These long sea kayakers were typical of Kangiqsujaq, and could reach up to 24 feet (7-8 metres) in length. It took two people to carry one, and they were covered with bearded sealskin, three very large skins from this great valuable seal, which has thicker skin than the ringed seal. They could also make kayak covers from ringed seals, but then it took seven or eight skins to cover such a kayak. So here one of the hunters is being helped into his kayak to go retrieve the wounded animal from this little observation point where the group of hunters were.

Here he is approaching the wounded beluga. Belugas were very valuable because they had a lot of really good fat, there could be up to ten centimetres of fat under the edible skin, the *mattaq*, and this fat was used to fuel the oil lamps for winter. And then there was the *mattaq*, the edible skin, which was very rich in vitamins, and which they ate dried, or fresh





and raw. Along the way they might kill a ringed seal like this one. And this is an adult beluga. The older they are, the whiter. When they are younger, they are bluish, a bluish white. The beluga was also a source of food; they ate it, they dried the fillets running along the spine, which were very tender, and they kept the sinews for use as sewing thread, because at that time caribou were unavailable, they had almost disappeared from northern Nunavik.

Kayaks like these needed ongoing maintenance. They recovered them with new skins every two years, on average. When they took off the old skins, they recycled them to make all sorts of things: containers, water buckets, soles for boots. The women worked collectively, inside the tents; here we see old Angaiorpak who was the oldest of the group, the 'doyenne,' helping assemble three bearded sealskins. To keep the sealskins fresh and raw, so they could be sewn, they had to be kept in urine in a sort of big pouch made of a piece of old kayak covering.

Once the three skins were sewn together they were attached to the frame, and then the women had to stretch it over the frame before doing the final stitching to make watertight seams using a waterproof stitch, a job that required the participation of seven or eight women to get it done in a day. So it took about a day to assemble the skins into one piece, and another day to attach the piece to the frame, which the owner had carefully repaired to replace any parts, making sure they were smooth so as not to tear the skins when they were stretched. They made sort of small buttonholes and stretched the skins with cords made of braided sinew; the skins had to be stretched taut to hold well, tightening them to the maximum because as the skins dry, they will stretch even more and become harder, almost like wood. So they have to be stretched to be effective and so that the women can make the final stitches to close up the covering and ensure that water cannot penetrate. It's quite a job. They used beluga sinew, dried on the rocks and then separated into fibers and braided together, and they had to prepare tens of metres of braided sinew. And everyone applied themselves, the skins have to be sewn, they had to prepare the spots where they make the buttonholes and do the stitching; everyone pitched in to finish it all in one day.

The wife of the kayak's owner had a special privilege; she was the one who sewed the section covering the bow of the kayak, which resembles a penis and is called *usuujaq* in Inuktitut. Because in addition to its practical use, the kayak is the principal tool of the male.





reappear when it was out of air, and little by little, the hunter would get closer until he could harpoon it and not lose it.

In summer, there were arctic char, the lake fish that travel upstream in the autumn to spawn, and then come down to the sea in the spring, down certain streams. So the Inuit had nets, which they could buy in exchange for furs. They bought nets and they also knew how to make them or repair them, because the nets needed maintenance. Here we see a man with his little boat, repairing or remaking bits of his net which he has spread out around him, or maybe he is cleaning it, because when it's pulled out of the water, it has algae on it.

I was talking about sewing thread earlier. They stored this thread in sewing kits made out of bird skin, from any kind of bird, although the preferred skin was from the common loon, a migratory aquatic bird which breeds in the north and has colourful plumage. There was a myth the Inuit used to tell in the old days, that the loon and the gull were white but they loved to paint. So these two white aquatic birds painted each other, and the gull painted the loon first, and when the loon wanted to reciprocate, he did the job badly and spilled his whole container of paint so the result was the crow, entirely black, while here he was, with this beautiful pattern that was made into a sewing kit. Except that the feathers were on the inside. So to see the beauty of the bird, we have to look at him as he is in the wild, with his feathers on the outside.

The loon has a long beak and extraordinary eyesight, and for the Inuit it served as an intermediary between the spirits, the game animals, and humans. When a loon appeared and spotted a hunter heading inland, travelling some distance, the loon would use one of his webbed feet to point to the direction where the hunter would find caribou. So obviously this was a belief, but according to many hunters it seemed that it was true. So they treated the loon with respect. It could not be killed for just any reason, killed for fun or as food. It played an important role, it accompanied the women, and it was a woman who worked the skins, cleaning it of fat, turning it inside out and chewing it so that it would dry well and fulfill its role as a sewing kit. So that when they put the sinews inside it, preferably caribou sinews, or beluga, they were protected from mildew because they were kept in a dry environment.





They made some very well designed toys, and the relationship with the dogs... you see, often a child had a dog, which it fed, but also sometimes the child would shake the dog and toss it on the ground, as sort of as a game. However, after the settlement of the Inuit, problems quickly arose, including the high concentration of dogs. There were often more dogs than people in the villages and camps. So this was a danger, with this concentration, and no one foresaw that the dogs would be hungry and there would be nothing to feed them, unlike in the hunting camps, where every time the hunters returned, the dogs could be sure of a share of the meat. And these hungry dogs could attack children and young people, and women were told to be careful if they were menstruating and always carry a stick, because the dogs, which obviously have a good sense of smell, might follow them or attack them. And even recently, in Igloodik, when there were some dog sled races during the Easter holidays, a young child was nearly disfigured by dogs he got a little too close to, the child had to be sent South for cosmetic surgery. And there were adults killed. All this led at one point to the killing of dogs. At first they wanted to require that dogs be tied, but when a tied and hungry dog manages to break free, it's dangerous. And eventually the police authorized anyone who saw a loose dog to kill it. So this created conflicts – you killed my dog so I'm going to kill yours – and this is how dogs ended up eliminated and were replaced by snowmobiles and motorboats.

So when they were heading off like that into the tundra, there was still a little work to finish. Here they are making waterproof boots, using a special seam on the boots, which have had the hair removed. They would soak the boots, often in urine, so that the hair would come off well, and they made this kind of seam, a special stitch that made the boots completely watertight precisely for this time of year. If they could afford rubber boots they bought them, but otherwise, and even today, the hunters and the people heading out to the camps were very happy to have these waterproof boots.

In the village they would set up the summer tents for as long as possible, although they also had houses, and they had dogs like these ones here, which are not tied. Sometimes fights would break out among the dogs, who were hungry for scraps of meat when a tent was being moved, big fights between the dominant dogs, and the humans would often have to intervene to make sure that the dogs did not inflict too great an injury on each other.



