



Quaqtaq Commentary

By Bernard Saladin d'Anglure

January 1956. A rabies epidemic transmitted by foxes had decimated the dog population of Kangirsuk. Two Inuit from Kangirsuk decided to try to find some dogs in Quartaq, and they invited me along. I was in Kangirsuk at the time. The two were Johnny Peters and Jusipi Nasaq. The trip took four days and three nights. Wherever we reached each evening, they would build a small igloo for the night, and then in the morning harness up the dogs again and we would continue our journey.

This is our arrival at Quaqtaq, seen from the hill that overlooks the village. In those days the only permanent house was the mission. The other dwellings were all big family igloos, often grouped together, two or three igloos together. The snowstorms they had in that area used to bury the igloos, so that after a month, they would have to build new ones, in the middle of winter, because the ones they were living in were completely snowed in, almost buried.

This fellow is Jaiku, whose igloo was buried. He was a little slower than the other men, with poor eyesight. People said he had designed his igloo a little too high. He put his sled across so that he could raise the blocks from the inside to finish the dome; meanwhile his adoptive son was helping him from the outside. We can see here an igloo almost completely covered with snow, and the height of the window in the main dome, and also the children outside, having fun sliding, and so on. Enjoying traditional winter activities. The children loved to play close to home and watch the adults working. And now they are circling around the igloo under construction.

Here we can see the adopted son, who is going to fill the chinks between the snow blocks, and then the inside of the igloo, where they have brought in more blocks. The blocks were initially cut from within the circumference of the igloo, but since they needed more, they cut them from farther away, where there was more snow and firm enough snow. Now, Jaiku is placing one of the big blocks of snow to complete the dome. Making the blocks all fit and hold together was an art.

This igloo belongs to Qamuraaluk and we can see the warm air escaping into the freezing cold atmosphere through a little chimney made of snow. The main window is made out of two big pieces of lake ice, shaped and thinned so that it lights up the main dome. There is a small triangular window on the middle igloo, which is where they stored the frozen carcasses of meat or maybe fish. The first dome is actually the porch of the igloo, where the dogs would sleep in cold spells. Igloos are very robust structures: the children could climb over the tops and not fall through. On the sides of the igloo, these sort of walls were built to buttress them and to provide better insulation against the storms by blocking the wind. There were some very cold winds blowing from the north, northwest, and northeast, while





the winds from the south were a little milder, but each wind brought its dangers for the igloo; warm winds would make it melt too quickly, and by reinforcing the walls, they could make the dome last longer before it collapsed. They were basically little ramparts made of snow.

When the weather was nice and the hunters were off on a hunting trip, the women would get together to work on sewing projects or other domestic activities. They very much enjoyed getting together and eating together. And they always had something for visitors. About 10% of the food consumed in a household was the share for visitors.

In 1956, there were no caribou in Nunavik, and the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) had reindeer skins sent from Aklavik, where they were raising reindeer imported from Alaska or Scandinavia. This enabled the HBC to supply skins to the Canadian Inuit communities that had none. Later, the caribou returned in great numbers, and traveled as far north as the sea during their long migrations. This is Lali, with her youngest in her *amauti*; this particular garment is not made from caribou.

Here we see Jugini in front of the igloo that belongs to Qamuraaluk, where he is covering the runners of his sled with peat, which he has just melted. Once it freezes again he planes it to make it as smooth as possible, and then moistens it with water that freezes, so that the sled will glide smoothly over both snow and ice. Before leaving on long journeys, he checks to make sure that everything is good and ready so that he is not caught short; he prepares the sled to move fast and glide well, a little like skiers who wax their skis, but in this case, he has to rely on natural materials.

In this scene, my two Inuit friends show me how to make a float out of a ringed sealskin turned inside out and with watertight double-stitched seams. To inflate it, they use the small opening and a nozzle. And when it's inflated, they plug it with a stopper made of the same material. The float is attached to a lanyard, and on the other end of the strap is the ivory and metal tip that attaches to the shaft of the harpoon. The device allows them to follow a harpooned animal and kill it with a spear, or to avoid losing an animal that has been hit with a bullet, while they hurry to retrieve it with the kayak. Here they are clowning around a bit, with one of them holding the end of the lanyard with the harpoon tip, as if he was a seal that was harpooned. The next image we see is an *ujjuk*, frozen rigid, which was killed two days earlier; they have removed the skin cylinders that will be cut into long strips and used for harnessing the dogs.

Here, we are looking at a *qulliq*. It's in a small igloo that has had part of the dome removed to let in enough light. Susie Alupa is using a boot softener. These sort of boots have a sole wraps up over the top of the foot like an Indian moccasin. This one is made of bearded





sealskin, a thick and waterproof skin that is not tanned, so when it dries after getting wet, it becomes very hard. So it has to be softened with this scraper to restore its flexibility.

At that time, the Inuit were collecting the top parts of the eider duck nests, which the birds construct from their own down (eider down is still famous as lightweight insulation). They rub it over cords stretched tight so that the dust falls through while the down, which is extremely light, gets caught on the cords. Here we see Susie Alupa cutting a piece of sealskin to make the upper for a boot. She will sew one side onto the sole and the other onto the shaft of the boot. But before she starts sewing, her mother Natsingajaq chews the parts that will be sewn, moistening the skin with saliva to soften it so the needle passes through more easily.

This is a sewing kit, made from the skin of a large loon, *tuulliq*, turned inside out like a rabbit skin. It makes an excellent sewing kit for keeping the sinews fresh to be used as sewing thread. The most prized sinews are from caribou, but when there are no caribou, they used sinews from beluga, or other animals. Coming back to the caribou sinews, they used the ones from the legs, or even better, taken from either side of the spine, and then pulled out a few of the fibers to make a length of sewing thread. The sinew tends to swell up when it gets a little wet, so it makes for very good watertight seams when they are sewn with a stitch called the tunnel stitch.

Next, Natsingajaq scrapes the piece of bearded sealskin for making the sole, to soften it. The piece looks very big, but she is going to fold up the sides that will attach to the upper.

Often, when the wind blows towards the north, it pushes the ice pack away from shore. A span of open water appears, and a black cloud forms above it. When this phenomenon occurs, the hunters head with their dog sleds to the edge of the ice pack, which is called the *sinaa*. Viewed from a distance at low tide, it looks like a small ice cliff lying between the land and the ice pack. It is formed by the tides.

The hunters have to spot the seals when they poke their heads above the surface of the water to breathe. Matusi Kululak uses his kayak to go out for the seals that have been shot, or to drive the seals towards the other hunters on the ice pack. Seals are curious, and when they hear small sounds from metal, or whistling sounds, they will come to see what is going on; they have very acute hearing.

The sea is very calm. Matusi comes back. The days are short in January, and darkness will make the crossing from the ice pack back to the land far more difficult. There is a very turbulent area where the ice has broken and refrozen, and so on. It requires a lot of attention to get across it with a team of dogs pulling a sled with a kayak seven meters long





tied to it. Before the animal freezes, the hunters eat the small intestines emptied of their contents, the raw liver, and the heart, all good sources of energy ... The light is fading, everyone gets ready, harnesses up the dogs, and it's time to leave.

Qamuraaluk did not go out on the hunting grounds, he was too busy readying his igloo, but he receives his share of the game, including some seal fat that he takes to his daughter Arpiq to fuel the *qulliq* in the family igloo. Arpiq's husband, Minguq, along with Qasilinaq, the wife of Qamuraaluk, are at the hospital. Arpiq boils a piece of seal meat for her youngest child, about one year old. The child spends part of its day on its mother's back. Some frost has formed on the ice window, which is made from a piece of lake ice scraped thin. There are two windows, one above the other, to supply light during the day. Qamuraaluk has attached an *ulu* to the end of a stick to scrape off the ice.

In March, the days are longer, and the Inuit, or many of them, decide to go farther south. Some of the people, several families, were going to the camp called Qajartalik to spend the spring hunting marine mammals now that they were again available; the others were heading to the community of Kangirsuk to take skins to Jimmy Ford, the trader at the Hudson's Bay Company. This was the only way they could obtain ammunition and then maybe some flour, lard, and so forth. There is Jugini's sled, and then on another sled we can see Mr. Walton, the first administrator from the Department of Indian Affairs for Northern Quebec. That sled is being driven by Bob May, the father of Mary Simon, who was based in Kuujuaq, and served as the interpreter for the administrator. They had come to Quaqtaq to hear a dispute involving the traditional marriage of a young woman against her will. Père Antoine had radioed the Administrator to come and resolve the conflict. And so when they returned south, I took advantage of the opportunity and went along. The missionary, Father Dion, O.M.I., also came on the journey so that he could visit some Catholic Inuit families already living in Qajartalik.

And this scene was taken not far from the one with the seven sleds, before arriving in Kangirsuk, where we split up to go our separate ways. And you can see that these are good dogs, well-nourished on the fat of marine mammals, and they were not affected by the rabies epidemic that hit the communities further south.

