UCLA
American Indian Culture and Research Journal

## Title

Uqalurait: An Oral History of Nunavut. Compiled and edited by John Bennet and Susan Rowley

**Permalink**
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7nk4369g

**Journal**
American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 34(3)

**ISSN**
0161-6463

**Author**
Wiget, Andrew

**Publication Date**
2010-06-01

**DOI**
10.17953

**Copyright Information**
This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, availalbe at https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/

eScholarship.org Powered by the California Digital Library
University of California

This age estimation is supported by direct cation-ratio assays on petroglyphs, diagnostic sinew-backed bow motifs, and charcoal and diagnostic artifacts from associated deposits.

Protohistoric Apache stone structures and petroglyphs on volcanic dikes are probably associated with lightning *gan* spirit beings mentioned in ethnographic accounts. Loendorf supports this association by having recovered and identified elevated levels of cattail pollen from soil deposits below the Stone Structure site, bearing in mind that this pollen is deliberately scattered by Apache shamans in order to stop storms or attract game. Reminiscent of rock-art sites that date back to the Early Archaic on the High Plains, the protohistoric Apache rock-art sites associated with walled structures are variants of "calling stations" for invoking hunting spirit helpers.

Comparatively large pecked and painted depictions of ungulates, bears, and bird-like figures probably date to the post–AD 1725 Historic period, dominated by mounted Comanche nomads from the northwest. Peckings, incisions, paintings, and drawings of horses, riders, and guns also belong to this period.

Although the rock art, archaeology, and ethnography of the High Plains reveal certain commonalities with neighboring areas and even more distant regions, the ancient and embedded relationship with game drives appears to delineate this region, even though hunting-related rock art also occurs on the distant Columbia Plateau. Instead of being associated with life-crisis rituals (for example, northern Great Basin), rain making (for example, Coso Range), raiding (for example, Northern Plains), or fertility deities (for example, Southern Appalachians), High Plains rock art, for the most part, is directly involved, spatially and conceptually, with the capture of fleet-footed, thundering herds. Knowing the variations in rock-art traditions and associated socioeconomic significances across the United States, it will be foolish to claim that if you have seen one kind of shamanic rock art you have seen them all.

The massive volunteer involvement in Loendorf's research is impressive, and the book that resulted from this cooperative venture is equally so. In all likelihood the book will not only become a reference for archaeologists doing research on the High Plains, but also it will also serve as an example of how to approach archaeology holistically.

*Johannes (Jannie) H. N. Loubser*
Stratum Unlimited

---

**Uqalurait: An Oral History of Nunavut.** Compiled and edited by John Bennet and Susan Rowley. Foreword by Suzanne Evaloardjuk, Peter Irniq, Uriash Puqiqnak, and David Serkoak. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004 (2008 paper). 520 pages. $75.00 cloth; $34.95 paper.

In 1999, Canada's Northwest Territories was officially divided to create the largest and newest Canadian federal territory, Nunavut, which comprises the bulk of the north-central mainland of North America, most of the islands of

Canada's Arctic including the very large Baffin and Ellesmere islands, and all the islands in Hudson, James, and Ungava bays. The establishment of Nunavut Territory was the culmination of a long process that began with negotiations to settle land claims of the Inuit in the region against the Canadian government. Those negotiations first broached the idea of creating a new self-governing territory. In 1992 a majority of voters in the Northwest Territories approved the division of the territory, the new boundaries, and 1999 as the year for finalizing the agreement. Today Nunavut is a reality, a principally Native self-governed territory, where Inuit constitute nearly 84 percent of the population of about thirty thousand and non-Natives only 15 percent.

Along the road to the claims settlement and the creation of Nunavut, the parties involved, benefiting from the accumulated experience of more than a half-century of land-claims processes in North America, undertook perhaps the most comprehensive, coordinated evaluation ever of a region's social, cultural, and natural resources, with a view toward understanding what could constitute the basis for sustainability and self-governance. The scope of this effort is almost inconceivable, involving thousands of face-to-face recorded and subsequently transcribed interviews, with photographic and video documentation, in hundreds of widely scattered Arctic communities dispersed across a territory of more than 800,000 square miles, an area that would make Nunavut, if it were a country, the fifteenth largest in the world. These interviews about social customs, subsistence patterns, and flora and fauna, not only undergirded Inuit claims but also secured a generation's recollections of life in the Arctic for the past century. Several important and unique scholarly projects emerged from this process, including the *Nunavut Atlas* (1991), edited by Rick Riewe, which used a geographic information system to map subsistence resources and cultural resources throughout the region. The computerized mapping, which has set a new standard for such work, is now the basis for the work of the Nunavut Planning Commission and available online at http://www.nunavut.ca/.

*Uqalurait: An Oral History of Nunavut* is another of the innovative scholarly productions emerging from the Nunavut process. Strictly speaking, it is not so much an oral history as it is an oral ethnography. Despite Nunavut's remoteness from population centers in the south, this region of the Canadian Arctic has borne a long history of ethnographic inquiry, from Franz Boas's *The Central Eskimo* (1888), through Diamond Jenness's work on the Canadian Arctic expedition of 1913 to 1918 and Knud Rasmussen's Danish Fifth Thule Expedition of 1921 to 1924, to Asen Balikci's *The Netsilik Eskimo* (1970), and even more recent works, most of which are sometimes referenced or quoted in *Uqalurait*. Unlike those works, however, *Uqalurait* emerged in 1993 at the beginning of the claims process as an Inuit effort to produce a history of their communities from their perspective to be used for themselves as an archive and educational resource and, at the same time, to provide official and nonofficial outsiders the cultural information necessary to sustain Inuit claims to protect subsistence, historic, and cultural sites.

These goals determined that as much as possible the book would consist of direct quotations from Inuit elders, transcribed verbatim and accurately attributed to individuals. These would be organized into chapters in which they would be sutured together with the briefest and least intrusive kind of commentary by the non-Inuit editors. Coupled with a lack of footnotes, these slim comments often could be much more helpful if they included some evaluation of the relative productivity of different strategies or the corroboration by archaeological data about traditions concerning the Tuniit (Dorset culture) people that preceded the Inuit in Nunavut or even included footnoted references directing the reader to additional publications. Some quotations were culled from classic ethnographic literature, but most are relatively recent, from the 1970s onward. These are complemented by maps, two sets of figures on Inuit kinship and on regional variations in seasonal rounds, a rich selection of archival black-and-white photographs, and sixteen color plates of Inuit art illustrating cultural practices or themes from oral tradition. The book has topic and proper-name indexes and a very useful Inuit glossary.

The book is divided into two parts. Part 1, "Inuit Identity," comprises twenty-three chapters about topics such as naming, food sharing, animals, justice, medicine, and cosmology that constitute a core of shared Inuit culture. Most of these chapters are relatively short, ranging from about eight to fifteen pages, and consist of the aforementioned quotations about the chapter topic linked by a sentence or two of nondirective commentary by the editors. Three, however, about architecture, material culture, and skin preparation and clothing are between thirty to forty pages; perhaps the length reflects the greater durability of memory culture reinforced by manual activity as contrasted with intangible belief systems and social behaviors. If part 1 elides regional and subgroup differentiation, part 2, "Regional Identity," celebrates it with four chapters, each about twenty-five pages in length, identifying the real differences in the seasonal round of local groups as different as the Amitturmiut, who are large sea-mammal hunters, and the Ahiarmiut, who survived on caribou and fish in the interior west of Hudson Bay and never went to the coast. These chapters again rely on the lightly framed quotations from Inuit elders, but the quotations are longer and more substantial. In part this is because they are predominantly narratives, particularly nuanced with the varieties of individual experience and response that humanize ethnographic generalizations. It is in these sections especially that one can get some sense through the narrative form of an oral history, of life as lived in an earlier time.

The strength of the book is its rich variety of source materials. This very richness, however, raises questions about the book's structure. This is not a book that can be read in the conventional sense of the word. It is an encyclopedic reference that is at best approached by sampling. The book constitutes, in a sense, field notes for an emergent community autoethnography, but there is no guidance, even from the community, about how to sort out and evaluate this data, which is a problem faced by every field researcher, and a problem that cannot be transcended by simply quoting community members. Even granted that the book is meant to represent "an insider's view," one would like to know something of the process by which some topics were selected for chapters and others passed over. The same may be said for the selection of quotations. At a minimum, some information about how the Inuit in Nunavut established their priorities for this project would provide a meaningful context for the wealth of information that threatens to inundate the reader.

Another concern is that, however noteworthy it is to identify every Inuit person who contributed information, we know little about how these people were chosen or their place in these communities that would help us evaluate their contribution. Thankfully, the book is well indexed, including a separate index of place and person names, which will make it especially useful to Nunavut residents looking up information about relatives or sites. Including personal profiles as part of the index would address this somewhat, though it may have lengthened the book so as to make it cost prohibitive. However useful the mining of interviews for bits of ethnographic memory culture, the folklorist in me wants very much to get some sense of the longer narratives in order to understand how these bits and pieces were elicited and to appreciate them in their original context in order to understand better how these ideas were linked in the vision of the storyteller.

Finally, in terms of history, the book seems to begin with a postulated "then," representing, the introduction says, "life as the Inuit lived it from the end of the nineteenth century into the early twentieth century" (xxvii). Taking Nunavut "now" as the assumed background into this inquiry, the book represents a mine of recovered traditions from memory culture that can serve the Inuit and specialists well. But the book provides little insight regarding how these communities and individuals participated in the change processes that transformed them and their life "then" to what it is and what they are "now." One would have liked to see more personal narratives of adaptation and resilience, reconfigured relationships, and redirected energies of the history of personal and social transformation.

In fairness, addressing these concerns would have produced a different book, maybe several. As it stands, *Uqalurait* is a remarkable achievement, an archive of memory culture created by a strong and resourceful people who understood from the beginning that building the future begins with honoring the past.

*Andrew Wiget*
New Mexico State University

**We Have a Religion: The 1920s Pueblo Indian Dance Controversy and American Religious Freedom.** By Tisa Wenger. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009. 336 pages. $59.95 cloth; $22.95 paper.

Tisa Wenger has produced an impressively researched, well-written analysis of the many uses of religious freedom discourse by various parties in a dispute about Pueblo ceremonial dance. Wenger resets the clock by fifty years with which historians and others tell the narrative of American Indian religious freedom, today typically focused on the activism leading up to the Taos Blue Lake controversy and the American Indian Religious Freedom Act (AIRFA) in the 1970s, and calls attention to the important respects in which Native