

Adaptation and Survival

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**Aqqaluk Lyngé
President, Inuit Circumpolar Council - Greenland
Vice Chair, UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues**

Adaptation and survival are two very familiar themes for Inuit of Greenland and the rest of the Arctic. Contrary to popular myth, Inuit have not remained stagnant over the millennia, but have adapted to many changes that have come our way. And also contrary to many anthropologists who predict that our culture will not survive, we are in fact not only surviving, but also thriving.

It is interesting that the recent buzzwords around climate change include “adaptation”. Much of the Arctic Council’s work on climate change will be focusing on adaptation, rather than mitigation or elimination. So too is the United Nation’s Framework Convention on Climate Change spending a lot of time on it. Like the onslaught of cultural, religious, and political upheavals that have been directed at Greenland over the centuries, climate change now is seen by most as a *fait-accomplis* and the most we can do is learn to adapt, they say. And hopefully survive.

When foreign ministers from the 8 Arctic nations met in Salekhard, Russia last year, they drafted a declaration. In that *Salekhard Declaration*, they did mention more than a few things about climate change, but the essence of their requests to senior government officials for the next few years was to have them “identify and share adaptation expertise and best practices ... so that indigenous ... residents can better adapt to climate change”.

It seems like everyone is throwing in the towel when it comes to climate change. They seem to be saying, forget about the causes of climate change, forget about mitigation, forget about who is responsible, forget about compensation, and forget about doing something about greenhouse gas emissions. They are rather saying, let’s learn to adapt to this new reality. Many are even saying, let’s take advantage of it.

Understanding adaptation is not an easy task. Planning adaptation might be an even more daunting one. In the case of Inuit, we adapted to new religions, new cultures, new economies, and new politics over the last centuries. But we didn’t have a plan each time a representative of the colonizers came to force change upon us. How to adapt to any change is not an easy thing to plan for. A strong society must rely on its inner strengths and go with that in facing a new environment, and new challenges. Only in hindsight can we say it was best to have done this; or that. Much of our adaptation came out of opposing outside influences. Through our opposing, we bent sometimes. We danced with

the outsider, but did not succumb. We compromised along the way, but these compromises were not strategically calculated or planned out well beforehand.

At an Arctic Council “climate change adaptation workshop” that took place in Norway last year, the participants could not even agree on the recommendations and had to settle for an incomplete report. This incomplete report also noted that “there seems to be a general lack of competence and knowledge on impacts and vulnerability, and on the adaptive capabilities of Arctic ecosystems and human communities.” Adaptation, I would suggest, is not where our focus should be at this time. At least not just yet. Adaptation, if needed at all, will rise to the surface as we continue to battle climate change. It is *through* the battle that adaptation will play itself out best. As it did in our battles with our colonizer, with the commercial whalers, and with the oil companies.

Although Greenlanders and all Inuit have demonstrated a tremendous ability to adapt over the millennia, I do not believe we should be so ready to quit trying to reverse the climate change trend. Just because we have been able to adapt to multiple forms of negative outside influences in the past, this does not mean Inuit should be embracing the new changes of melting ice caps, thinning ice, widening northwest passages, increasing ship transportation, growing oil and gas exploration, and rising industrial interest.

I am also urging all of us to vigorously combat climate change because we just might not be *able* to adapt. Might this outside onslaught foisted upon us here in the Arctic be just too big a dance partner? How do we respond to the environmental crisis that is sure to follow when oil and gas and minerals are indiscriminately taken from our lands and seas? Or when nations make sovereignty claims and thereby shunning us Inuit aside? Or when our ice becomes too thin that our hunters can no longer hunt? Just maybe our very survival is at stake this time around. At least we should continue to act as if it is.

There are many ways to oppose and, at the same time, to do it constructively. One such way is to analyze the power relations found within the structures of the human-induced forces that have caused climate change in the first place. And then act on this analysis.

Yet, the magnitude of the climate change challenge is such that a response of a higher order also needs to be sought. Given the overwhelming evidence of how the Earth has already changed, and certainly the Arctic, I could be accused of being desperate, I know. Perhaps I am simply waiting for a miracle to happen.

I would not call it a miracle, but I agree that something very strong and very spiritual must happen to reverse what is happening to us.

I agree with Al Gore when, in 2006, he called climate change an “impending planetary emergency”. His words “danger which could bring the end of civilization” are not an exaggeration, especially when one looks at climate change through the eyes of an Inuit hunter in Greenland. Hunters use their intimate knowledge of the environment to stalk their prey so their families and the rest of us in Greenland can eat narwhal mattak, seal liver, and walrus meat. Hunters tell us that it is natural for animal migration patterns to

change over time and it's the same with the weather. But they told us two decades ago that something was fundamentally different and, through a hunter-centred research project (*Sila Inuk*) that ICC is undertaking, we continue to hear it today. The hunters report disappearing animals, new species arriving in their territories, changing water currents, disappearing sea ice, difficulty in hunting, and so on. In other words their world, like that of Al Gore's, is in danger of ending.

If we agree with Al Gore, or with the hunter in Greenland for that matter, both of whom use alarming language to describe what is happening to our planet and civilization, then we must reach for equally dramatic language and approaches to turn this potential calamity around.

This symposium, some might say, uses dramatic language. Yesterday, we heard the dramatic and powerful language of silent prayer. It attempts to discuss religion and science in the same breath. That is dramatic. And powerful.

I am not an atheist. Nor am I agnostic. I believe in a soul and I believe it was put there by a creator.

I think the soul could be called upon to help address this "impending planetary emergency", as Gore calls it.

For me a soul is one's inner essence that has feeling, intelligence, and the ability to discern right from wrong. A soul is able to judge. Plato and Socrates described the soul as the essence of a person and that which was able to decide how each of us behaves. According to the shamanistic tradition of my people, the Inuit, a soul can heal once it is brought back to the body. Although a soul is personal and reflects one's own essential identity, I also believe that each soul craves company and that "like-minded souls" tend to seek each other out.

The reality of climate change dictates that there are no easy answers, and so we need to individually and collectively dig deep into our inner sanctums, and find solutions.

Hans Egede, a Christian missionary, came to Greenland in 1721. He came to save our souls. It was his understanding that my people's souls were lost and that they lived immoral lives. The jury is still out on whether or not he succeeded, but we did adapt our religious ways somewhat. What if we reverse this notion of humans coming to save souls, and think of how our souls might be able to save humans? In particular, how can our very essence of who we are as individual beings be used to combat climate change? Somehow we must engage enough individuals – a critical mass – who, through the core of their beings commit to challenging and changing the structures that have brought us climate change.

In most world religions, such as Christianity, and in shamanistic traditions among indigenous peoples, including Inuit, the soul is more powerful than the body. It lives on after death. It is what the priest, the missionary, and the shaman communicate with.

Shamans, in many traditions, can change themselves into birds and find souls that have moved on to another realm and fly them back. Inuit shamans (or *angakkoq*) didn't only make mystical flights, but also journeyed to the depths of the sea. Early Germanic peoples apparently believed that souls of their relatives rested at the bottom of the sea as well.

Can this language of 'soul' still serve us today? I believe that it can. Although I don't agree with the techniques of soul hunting used by Hans Egede, I do admire him for getting it at least partially correct: the soul matters. Hans Egede's Christianity also linked the soul to ethical living. You live right and your soul will ascend to heaven after you die. The soul has the power to judge and to discern. It has intelligence and knows right from wrong. Because it knows right from wrong, a language of the soul includes ethical considerations. The soul has the power to make whole. It just might be able to take on something as alarming as climate change.

The Inuit soul compels us to act decisively on climate change. It knows right from wrong and is at the essence of who we are as human beings. Acting on climate change and acting now is the right thing to do.

Knud Rasmussen was a famous Greenlandic explorer, who made many expeditions across Greenland and the Arctic as a whole in the early 1900s. Here, in part, is what he was told by the Inughuit shaman Majaaq about the soul in 1908:

"The Soul is what makes you beautiful, makes you a man. It is that alone that makes you will, act and be busy. It is what directs your whole life."

It is this soul that the Christian missionary, Hans Egede, and other Europeans almost took away from us Inuit when he and his family landed in the 1700s, and when others followed. We adapted, but did not give up who we were. And our soul survived. It is time now for us to use it wisely and profoundly.

A few things attract me to Christianity: its emphasis on forgiveness and its imagery of regeneration and renewal. The old (or bad) world can be replaced with the new (or good) world. One can be born again. Or made whole.

Perhaps I am comfortable with these tenets because the Inuit myths, tales, and legends, as well as the Inuit ethics as practised today reflect these same precepts. Our soul lives through many animals, being born again many times. While one can often find tales of revenge in our legends, one also finds forgiveness. And that is how we live today. One only has to look at how we have made peace with our former colonizer, Denmark. We never gave in. We never allowed the Europeans to dominate us and we never will. But we made deals. We compromised when it was necessary and we shared. We adapted.

With respect to climate change, we don't yet know what adaptive measures will be necessary. Part of the reason is that scientists who come to study us, drill ice cores and take them home, measure our sea ice, and so forth don't tell us what they are doing.

When it comes to climate change adaptation, we don't yet have a "science for the people". Political leaders need to make decisions and they need to make them on understandable science. This is as true for a leader born in Texas as it is for one born in Disko Bay.

ICC's climate change study, *Sila Inuk*, is a step in the right direction. It is looking at climate change from the experiences of hunters. Yet, we would like western scientists to join us in this or similar projects. The Inuit hunter and the PhD student need to find common ground.

The Arctic has been the object of interest for many over the centuries, but today's intense gaze northwards may be the greatest ever. I would like to remind the new explorers of today – the scientist, the industrialist, the military man, and the foreign leader – that the Arctic and Greenland's new geo-strategic environment is not something that was developed for *them* to explore in. It is the result of a spectrum of historical events and political decisions taken by many, but mostly it is due to climate change. When I hear today's explorers talk about the tragedy of climate change, or the benefits of climate change, for that matter, it seems like it's all about them. They forget the indigenous peoples that inhabit the Arctic. They ignore that it is they who are most affected.

Before sovereignty claims increase, and before research intensifies, and before transportation routes are more greatly traveled, I think it is time to pause and take stock. We must develop, for the sake of my people and the world at large, a formal international process focusing on the Arctic that includes indigenous peoples having meaningful voices. Or we might just get washed away in the melting ice.

One of ICC's objectives is to keep the Arctic out of the hands of the military and encourage peaceful uses of the North Pole. Maybe we should think of a kind of "peace sanctuary" around the North Pole where all can benefit.

Another thing that ICC will continue to promote is that the Arctic governments should use the Arctic Council more effectively in tackling these issues. Let's collectively talk about who owns the Arctic there, and how we can address the many challenges that climate change has brought us. Finally, I would propose that Denmark, Canada, Russia, the USA and the other Arctic countries join ICC in promoting a special UN forum that specifically addresses the Arctic. It is only through these types of collective initiatives, which include indigenous peoples' souls at the centre, that will enable us to deal with this new reality. It may be the only we can adapt and survive.

Thank-you.