

## Traditional Inupiat Education

Excerpts from Paul Ongtooguk [www.alaskool.org](http://www.alaskool.org)

Address by Eben Hopson



### ***Inupiat Society: The Myth***

Traditional Alaska Natives are often thought of as a common, nomadic culture that moved almost randomly with little more than hope to guide decisions about where to seek the next meal and where to set up the next shelter. The Hollywood image of Alaska and Alaska Natives reinforces this stereotype as the film image is one of fur-clad people living in blinding blizzards of constant snow. Imagine the camera, as it pans up to a thin line of specks on the horizon. The camera slowly closes in and the specks become visible as people who are walking into a blizzard. (I don't know why we always walk into blizzards). Then, the narrator, in a low, serious tone announces "In a ceaseless quest for survival, the hearty Eskimo are in search of the caribou." The image is an important one, as it represents most peoples' only visual encounter with the traditional life of the Eskimo. It is also false! It portrays the Eskimo as playing survival roulette, wandering about hoping to chance upon some caribou.

### ***Inupiat Society: Some Realities***

A culture would not long survive in the Arctic, much less develop over several thousand years, if it were dependent on such random luck. Rather, the Inupiat cycle of life developed through a careful consideration of the environment. Some traditional foods were caribou, marmot, seal, walrus, several variety of whale, many kinds of fish, bear, rabbit, ptarmigan and a variety of roots, eggs, seeds and berries. Hunting and fishing were planned based on the knowledge of where animals and fish had been found in the past and knowledge about weather conditions and the changing patterns of climate.

Camps were carefully chosen locations. The camp, or living area was selected because it was perceived as the most likely location of a concentration of food. Thus, it was not mere hope and persistence that allowed Inupiat society to develop in the North.

In traditional Inupiat society the community is a school. When, where and what lessons occur are dependent upon the time, the place and the season. The lessons are tied to the traditional cycle of life. Hunting skills and conditioning were and are learned through traditional games and competition: wrestling, weight lifting, the one and two foot high kick, etc. Further, Inupiat Society has developed many art forms including: sculpture, music, dance and story. Celebrations and ceremonies are a part of Inupiat communities as are people who are philosophers and historians.

### ***Excerpts from Eben Hopson's Address:***

Inupiat North Slope Natives have successfully fought to regain control over their educational system and have succeeded with 'Home Rule'. Their stated goals according to former mayor of the North Slope Borough, Eben Hopson, are: "To have teachers who will reflect and transmit our ideals and values. We must have Inupiat-centered orientation in all areas of instruction. I do not want my children to learn that we were "discovered" by Columbus or Vitus Bering. I do not want to hear that we were barbaric or uncivilized. I do not want to see school planning surveys, which list hunting, fishing, whaling or trapping as social or recreational activities."

For 87 years the Bureau of Indian Affairs tried to destroy our culture through the education of our children. Those who would destroy our culture did not succeed. However, it was not without cost. Many of our people have suffered. We all know the social ills we endure today.

Our children must be taught in our Inupiat language, with English as the secondary language.

It is important to remember the lessons of the past. In addition, we must search and master the new changes if we are to continue to dominate the Arctic. We have demonstrated we can survive the trespasses that have been perpetuated upon us. We have been successful in establishing our own home rule government. We have been able to achieve self-government. We must strive to ensure that our borough, our city governments and our school systems reflect our Inupiat ideals. We are Inupiat!"