

Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München
Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society

Hopeless Adaptation

The History of an Eskimo and a Warming Greenland

Introduction to Environmental Anthropology

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Abstract

This fictional essay is about Anuk, a forty-seven-year-old Inuit in the High Arctic in Greenland. He lives in the year 2049 and thinks back to better times. In his diary, he talks about his first hunting trip, the changing environmental conditions, and his failed attempt to adapt without losing tradition. He shares his sorrows and points out the huge impact of global warming on the Inuit. Furthermore, he criticizes western society and the way it treats the earth. Moreover, background information about the Inuit and climate change is provided.

Key Words

tradition – Inuit – climate change – adaptation – melting environment

Introduction

“In the Arctic, human life takes place under the breath of ice.”

(Diemberger et al. 2012, p. 227)

Here, Kirstin Hastrup describes the special relationship between Arctic people and their environment—the ice. In this context, ice isn't solely a surrounding component, but an agent in the human-nonhuman network and the center of all theories and histories (*ibid.*). The unique relationship between the indigenous people and nature inspired me to write a fictional essay about the Inuit and the challenges they face due to global warming. During a school exchange program with Canadian students in 2009, I had the opportunity to talk with my exchange partner's grandmother, who is a descendant of the Inuit. Her pride and passion for the community is very fresh and vivid in my mind. In October 2019, I heard about the subject again in the Lunchtime Discussion, a seminar with several short presentations by fellows of the Rachel Carson Center and discussion afterwards. During this course, Kelly Bushnell and Johnny Issaluk, an Inuit, informed us about the shrinking ice of the Canadian Arctic and the emerging problems and changes to the Inuit's lifestyle it causes. Honestly, I have never previously thought about the fact that dwindling ice also implies dwindling culture and tradition. This topic is highly significant because the Arctic is the fastest warming region in the world. The temperature increase is more than twice the global average (Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme 2017). Therefore, I want to demonstrate the enormous consequences of global warming for the Inuit with a fictional tale of the Eskimo Anuk, who tries to adapt to his new environment. Adaptation is meant “to be a process of making decisions and taking actions in order to cope with changes in social-ecological systems” (Nuttall 2010, p. 22). Furthermore, it can imply an ability to anticipate, which “is about intentionality, action, agency, imagination, possibility, and choice; but it is also about being doubtful, unsure, uncertain, fearful, and apprehensive” (*ibid.*, p. 23). Both definitions have to be considered and help to understand the descriptions of Anuk. He lives in the High Arctic in Greenland and is forty-seven years old. In his diary, he expresses his feelings, as a father of two children, about not being able to pass on to them his knowledge about his beloved culture. But before digging into his story, some background information about the current developments in Greenland's environment and about the culture of the Inuit is needed.

Background information

The following diary entries rely on background information about environmental changes in Greenland and the culture of the Inuit, especially the polar Eskimos.

The Inuits

The journal is primarily based on the culture of the Polar Eskimos, also called Inughuit. This minority group lives on the west coast of North Greenland in the High Arctic (Encyclopedia of World Cultures 26.02.20). The hunting community consists of 700 people. Most of them, 600, live in Qaanaaq, and the others are spread over three settlements. In order to travel from settlements in the south to the north, they have to cover a distance of many thousands of kilometres (Hastrup 2018). While the men hunt, women's tasks are "coping with housekeeping, raising children, cooking, preparing skins, and butchering the seals their husbands bring in" (Buijs 2010, p. 49). As hunter's wives, they have an honourable status (*ibid.*). Before the Arctic hunters were encountered for the very first time by John Ross in the early 19th century, they thought there is no other living being in the universe apart from them. Originally, the Eskimos are descendants of immigrants from the Americas. They have always had to deal with the change of the climate and living conditions. For example, they were isolated from the southern settlements due to masses of ice during the Little Ice Age, between the 16th and the early 17th century. Their access to game was restricted. It is not clear whether these Arctic hunters have survived or whether new groups have settled. Living there means depending on local resources, such as seals, fish, walruses, and so on. Their entanglement with natural and social issues is very strong (Hastrup 2018). In order to better understand this bond, it is necessary to have a look at the Inuit term *sila* (Diemberger et al. 2012). On one hand, it means weather and climate, but on the other hand it goes deeper and characterizes also the "breath of life, the reason for seasonal and other changes, and the fundamental principle underlying the natural world and its comprehensive 'mind.'" (*ibid.*, p. 227). Furthermore, *sila* connotes the concurrence of an individual person and the environment. This context clearly shows that Inuit people perceive changes in climate not just as varying weather conditions but as change in their own sense of self, in a very personal way (Diemberger et al. 2012; Crate & Nuttall 2016). In the Greenlandic Arctic, changing conditions are an everyday issue.

The impacts of climate change for Greenland

Since the late 19th century, the earth has become 0,8°C warmer, but the temperature of the Arctic has already risen 2 to 3°C (Post et al. 2019). Hence, Greenland's ice is melting seven times faster than it did in the 1990's (Amos 2019). The sea-ice decreased in scope and thickness and in the past decade reached a record minimum, which affects marine mammals and organisms especially. Therefore, polar bears, for example, will lose their optimal habitat, due to the difficulty of finding food on the ice (Post et al. 2019). The shrinking of ice leads to an increasing global sea-level rise, which will affect coastal communities and low-lying islands all over the world. Apart from that, more open water emerges every month (Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme 2017). The glaciers are thawing very fast. There is a high probability that global warming of about 1,6 degrees will cause an unstoppable melting. Even if global warming could be limited to 2 degrees, the glaciers will vanish (Löffken 2012). In addition, the duration of snow cover is declining 2 to 4 days per decade and the permafrost is thawing. According to predictions, permafrost could be decreased by two-thirds by 2080, if greenhouse gas emission continue to be this high. Another result is the changing habitats of wildlife and ecosystems. Biodiversity loss will be an reoccurring problem. Some species will have to leave their home territory and others could settle in new areas. As consequence of global warming, the prevalence of phytoplankton and non-native species will grow (Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme 2017). These enormous changes directly affect the communities living in Greenland.

These impacts and affections are linked to the Inuit culture in the following diary entries.

My First Hunting Trip

I clearly remember the first time I went hunting with my dad and the other men in our settlement. It is a very special moment for every young male Inuit. *Finally I will be one of the men*, I thought back then. I was very nervous and excited. Early in the morning it was my task to feed our dogs and get them ready for the long trip. They had a unique relationship with my father, which I just can't describe. *'You have to see them as individuals. Each one has its own characteristics, its strengths and its weaknesses. If you understand this, they will trust you and be a great team,'* he always said. The dog sled took us fifty kilometres over the frozen sea, away from home, and closer to the walrus. I've never been in this region before. My father knew exactly where we had to turn right or left, and I was very impressed by his sense of orientation because for me everything here looked the same, one kilometre after another. During our travel we had to stop again and again. The area to find walruses was the same all year, but of course the small groups didn't stay in one place, they moved from one to another. My father, a very big and strong man, told me to be as quiet as I could and he carefully observed the environment and at last knew where we had to go. He and the other men were able to perceive every little change in the ice and the nature. Since childhood he taught me to study my surroundings very precisely. From that moment, I understood why I had to. After another hour of travelling, we found a suitable hunting ground and finally stopped. As walruses are very aggressive, our settlement has developed a communal hunting strategy, in which every man of the settlement joined the hunt and afterwards, the game was shared. So now we had to walk a long way towards the ice edge and the walrus because it wasn't safe to travel with the dog sleds anymore. I felt that they were here. We were getting closer to them. We chose a place on thin ice and waited several minutes—as quiet as mice, armed with harpoons and prepared to shoot. Then suddenly the beautiful creature appeared in the water and three men shot the harpoons as fast as they could. I clearly remember the cry of the walrus and the splash when it plunged into the water. The men cheered and threw a net to catch the animal. Then, we all tried to drag it out of the water together. It fidgeted and struggled until it succumbed to its wounds. We were lucky that the walrus was alone. Usually, they are with small groups and attack when you hit one of them with the harpoon. I remember my fear, looking out to see whether another walrus was going to turn on us. But then I looked at my father. He smiled at me and I felt safe next to him. He was known as *piniartorsuaq*, which means great hunter. This status was ascribed to him because of his admirable abilities. A good hunter was always prepared and has a good bond with the hunting spirits. He precisely observes his environment and is able to feel when he is in danger when something rapidly changes. The status was a special honour, and I was very proud to be his son. It was an amazing feeling, knowing that now I was also part of the hunters and that this was my first real contribution to the community.

Well, I always wanted my son to feel the same way as I did: being a part of our Inuit settlement. But times have changed. Greenland is warming and the ice is melting. Walrus have become very rare and hunting now is nearly impossible. The animals are very vulnerable to changes in their environment. It all began when they started leaving the hunting regions earlier and getting back later from their summer habitat. Now, you hardly see any of them. Sometimes, they are spotted farther away from the coast, but with no chance to hunt them. The government also established a protection law in order to prevent their extinction. In my opinion, this wasn't necessary, because Inuit hunters would never let them become extinct. They have great respect for nature as well as animals, and a special relationship to walrus. I always loved the tales and myths my mom narrated. One says that humans and other living creatures are affected by the skins that they wear. If they are wearing walrus skin, for example, they can borrow its attributes, like the skill of holding one's breath for a long time under water. Walrus have always been hunted by the Inuit. They were not just food for us; they had a very important role in our imagination, encouraging respect for nature and social cohesion. I tried to explain this to my children, but they could not understand without ever having been hunting. This makes me very sad, so I try not to think about it.

Changing Conditions

Walrus hunting isn't the only thing that has changed and that my children will never have the chance to experience. It started out slowly but now it's getting worse and worse very fast. At first, we noticed that the seasons had changed. The summer lasted longer and winter was getting shorter, like the sea ice, which freezes later and thaws earlier. Therefore, our hunting grounds and routes were affected. The ice was getting thinner and traveling more dangerous. Our movement was progressively restricted. We had to find new, safe routes. But unfortunately, the distances we had to cover were increasing and our hunting trips became more and more exhausting. Moreover, our surroundings have changed so much that navigating has become very difficult. Glaciers, for example, move faster and are dwindling enormously, so that new landscapes, which were hidden under the ice, appear. The natural world, which was once white and covered in beautiful ice, is now black with dark scree and rocks. The names of places, given by our ancestors, no longer make sense. They relate to their former appearances, characteristics of the land, or role as hunting grounds. But now they don't fit anymore, and we lose our orientation. We discerned the changes in the environment with all our senses. We listened to the sounds of our surroundings and could feel the bearing of the water, ice, and icebergs. The changed noises when our sleds slid on the snow and the consistency of the snow worried us. The weather in Greenland was getting more unpredictable. For example, storms with incredible and frightening winds appeared

with increasing frequency, which made traveling much more difficult. Although we, the indigenous people, knew our environment and the behaviour of the ice best, our opinion was of no value to politicians and scientists. They've always looked down on us. We knew much earlier than anyone that our environment is going to dwindle. The issue of change was the only topic we were talking about in our village all day. This was very exhausting. After trying very hard, we realized that we had to find a new, easier way to find game. So we decided to hunt fish like salmon or the Greenland halibut instead of walruses and seals. We settled down on the coast. Usually, we were moving around and always following our game. In winter, we often lived in small tents or in igloos and in summer we returned home to our settlement. But now, our living resources stay in one place, and so do we. But with fishing we didn't earn much money, so we received subsidies. Nevertheless, we couldn't make a good living out of it. We could barely feed ourselves. Thus, I had to sell nearly all of my treasured dogs. This was very hard for me because we had a special bond with each other. Like my father said, '*You have to see them as individuals. If you understand this, they will trust you.*' And they did. But I just couldn't keep them. Either they would have starved, or my family would have. For this reason we had to share our sleds with others from the settlement. However, the changing conditions weren't bad for everyone. I've heard from some people in the south, that they are looking forward to the melting environment. The conditions for successful agriculture are getting increasingly better and more food can be grown. Furthermore, sheep farmers are very happy about the rising green grazing area. Due to the shrinking ice, the mining of rare raw materials became possible. Now, Greenland's access to oil, gas, gold, and uranium was much improved and the economy was booming. Politicians have seen it as a chance to become more independent from Denmark, and so it became. Furthermore, the extractive industry has created many jobs. There, one earned much more than in the fish industry, so some of the former Inuit were very lucky working there. One told me: *It isn't good for us to be stuck in the past. We have to adapt to a globalized world or they will force us to.* Well, to some degree I can understand his argument, but is this the adaptation we want? I didn't think so, but our situation was quite hopeless.

Hopeless Adaptation

My father always told me '*Son, you have to take what nature gives you and make the best out of it. You have to feel what nature needs and give back what is required. Adapting to nature is the most important thing I will teach you.*' I wonder if he would still think the same if he knew that our nature and native land have changed substantially. For sure, our culture has managed to survive a lot of difficult times and periods of change. But this time, adaptation cannot be done without losing our culture and traditions. *Take what nature gives*

you. Well, she gives us new species I think, but nothing that is related to or connected with us, nothing that is part of our traditions or histories. Maybe one task of adaptation is to include new agents in our human-nonhuman network. But I'm not sure. I think, instead of giving, she took our game and our beloved home. *Feel what nature needs*. I can feel, but I am powerless. I can't give nature the rest that she needs. Researchers I saw on the news have verified what I already knew: the ice melting can't be stopped anymore. Human beings have transformed our earth, took everything it had to give and developed destructive technologies in order to ruin their own living environment. They have disturbed it to a huge extent, so that it can never recover. But now nature will fight back. Some elderly men in our settlement don't believe that human influences are the reason for the warming, but *sila*. They say it is its will and we can't do anything against it. We have to find new ways of living.

I am not the only one of the community who noticed the unchangeable melting. Many have tried to repress it, to deny it, or to drown their sorrows in alcohol, but now this isn't possible anymore. Nearly all of them gave up hunting and tried to find something else in order to survive and to sustain their families. Only few of them stay firm and try to make a living out of the traditional resources. *'I'd rather die than give up my routes and live like those in western countries, who only trample upon our sila,'* an older man told me. Others decided to migrate to another country, because they wanted to afford their children a better education and future without uncertain living conditions. Most of the Inuit are now working in the tourism sector or the fishing or mining industry. Just like me. Five years ago I started to work as a guide in an Inuit museum. Every day I have to tell stories about our vanished traditions. This makes me very desolate. Sometimes I feel like I can't breathe, can't rebound. I can't imagine what my father would say about that. But what should I do? I have to feed my wife and my children. For long enough we had to go to bed hungry. More and more tourists are visiting Greenland. So it seems that at least this job will be safe for a long time. Since it became public that our ice is beginning to melt, they have been pouncing on our country like vultures. They come and look at us pityingly as if we were some species that will never appear again. Honestly, I hate them. They arrive here and disrespect our nature and homeland animals. They visit a destroyed environment while pretending it wasn't their fault. We are the victims of changes that are caused by others. We've always tried to protect nature, did what was good to the earth. We only took what we needed to survive and have not become greedy and exploited our environment. But now we can't modify the outcome; that's a fact. Unfortunately, some of the Inuit couldn't deal with this certainty and committed suicide. The disappearing ice took their pride and identity away.

Although we tried to maintain our settlement and community, we failed. We met, discussed our crisis and the future, but the cohesion among the Inuit was slowly vanishing. How can we adapt to something that robs us of our identity? We thought about starting some kind

of lecture serie, in which we can pass our knowledge und traditions onto our children. But what should we teach them if no snow is left? Why should we even teach them? They don't have the possibility to use und practice it. Apart from that, our population has decreased significantly. My children should have a better life, with no hunger and existential fear. So now my wife and I try to save money in order to enable them to study. She works in the Inuit museum just like me. Her task is to show the western people how to manufacture indigenous clothing out of animal skin. She is very brave and tries everything to make the best out of our situation. So I am very sorry dad, but we can only adapt and live a better life if we leave our traditions behind. As I thought about this I realized that my Inuit generation will probably be the last. The only things I can share with my children and my grandchildren are stories about how it was and felt to be an Inuit. But the most important heritage is to teach them the meaning of *sila* and the respect it deserves. We adapted to our new environment, but the price was high: we lost our traditions and culture.

Conclusion

On the basis of Anuk's diary entries, the difficulty of adaptation to the newly changing conditions in Greenland can be understood. His stories show the deep entanglement of environment and social life and furthermore illustrate the enormous effects of global warming on the Inuit. For them dwindling ice also means the dwindling of some parts of their culture. In addition to that, the special bond between the indigenous people and the animals, for example their sled-dogs, has been considered. They live very close to nature and animals, which can be inferred from the meaning of the Inuit word *sila*. Animals and nature are treated with respect. This becomes clear when Anuk narrates his first hunting trip and his beliefs about the walrus. Due to current changes this special human-animal relationship can no longer be maintained. This essay also describes the impact of globalized, selfish, and wasteful lifestyles on guiltless and nature-respecting cultures. Although they aren't responsible for the changing world, they are the first victims of global warming. This is a fact everyone should think about. Even if the melting environment could enable Greenland to improve their economy and to become more independent from Denmark, the enormous consequences that affect the vulnerable indigenous groups can't be ignored. Besides, the unique character of the wonderful white landscapes with glaciers and pack ice will be lost. Moreover, in this story Anuk had to make difficult decisions about his process of adaptation in order to cope with the consequences of climate change and to enable his family a good life. He therefore had to give up many things that were part of his beloved former life. Especially the fact that he isn't able to pass on his father's tradition to his children is very painful for him. Adaptation in this case means leaving traditions and culture behind. Just like Anuk, other Inuits in Greenland could also be affected in the same way if climate change continues. This essay can be seen as an example of the damage that human-caused global warming could create.

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Impressions for the story

My first hunting trip

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Declaration of Authorship

I hereby declare that the essay submitted is my own unaided work. All direct or indirect sources used are acknowledged as references.

This paper was not previously presented to another examination board and has not been published.

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