

Of what a house can do: Notes on houses as agents in social change and religious transformation in the contemporary Inuit community of Qikiqtarjuaq

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Introduction

What are things? Scholars, curators, and indigenous peoples increasingly engage in discourses on “objects” both in the field and in museums. Discussing Inuit material culture, such as clothing, art, and architecture, it is specifically the “object” status that is very problematic as Inuit objects often more behave like subjects. In order to explore the characteristics of Inuit objects, Cunera Buijs, Jarich Oosten, and Nicole Stuckenberg organized the workshop *Cultural dialogues and material cultures: speaking about objects* at the *Inuit Studies Conference* in Paris, in 2006. It is within this context that I studied Inuit perceptions and uses of contemporary housing – housing that is in today’s settlements actually entirely of Western origin and manufacture – using material that I gathered during my fourteen month of fieldwork in the community of Qikiqtarjuaq, Nunavut, between 1999 and 2001. The following text should be read as explorative deliberations on this topic laying out the landscape for a research project.

Inuit technology, clothing, and art are made and used in a reality that blends the physical and the spiritual dimensions of being. For example, as a hunter throws his harpoon, he simultaneously connects to his prey’s body and soul in both the object of the weapon (often decorated and constructed with much care to please the animal) and in the act of killing (see for example STUCKENBERGER 2007). It is this combination of materiality and spiritual essence of Inuit objects that constitutes the focus of my investigation into past

and contemporary Inuit housing in its capacity to integrate Western models of living into traditional Inuit lifeways.

Inuit housing in the nomadic past

From a Western perspective a house is, briefly speaking, a functional object constructed to provide such services as shelter, comfort, and social status, and aesthetic pleasure¹. Inuit share the pragmatic perspective that a house has to be adapted to the Arctic seasons and to a nomadic lifestyle. Inuit lived off the land from hunting, fishing, and gathering greens and berries in the past. Depending heavily on game, they followed the large sea and land mammals and adapted their group size to meet the requirements of hunting and the limitations of the available resources. Frequent moving and changes in the seasonal camp locations made a reduction of material possessions and of building material that needed transportation imperative. Past Inuit housing is famous for the resourceful use of a very limited variety of materials and the house's ingenious design. A renown example is the igloo, a dome-shaped house built of snow blocks that provided its inhabitants with a high degree of insulation from the Arctic winter's cold and winds (see COOK 1996, DI MENNA 2003, KERSHAW *et al.* 1996).

While Inuit architecture speaks to the practical and physical conditions of Inuit life, it also expresses how people connect to their environment culturally. Inuit perceptions of their world and of their place within it can best be described as holistic. Inuit emphasize that the physical, economic, social, and religious domains of life are integrated in Inuit cosmology and cannot be well understood if studied isolated from each other. Ethno-Linguist Michèle Therrien in *Le corps Inuit* (1987) and Guy Bordin in "De l'habitat nomade à la maison moderne chez les Inuit de l'arctique oriental canadien" (2003) applied this perspective to their study of the semantics of Inuit housing. They found that the "language" of Inuit housing combines expressions of perceptions of the world, the seasonal cycle of social lifeways, with the human and in particular the female body in its design and use².

Such seemingly disparate fields as the seasonal cycle, social lifeways, and the female body find their connection in Inuit cosmology that interrelates them in a common origin. Inuit creation myths describe how the world diversified from being sky and land bearing the first human beings into its multitude of forms and beings of today. With each

¹ This statement holds true, I think, for modern Western mind frames. Local knowledge, though, abounds of stories of houses taking on the character of their owners or of events, such as gruesome murders, that occurred there. It seems that there is a notion that a house becomes infused with some kind of mental and emotional essence of those who inhabit it, thus transcending the categories of object and subject.

² See also SALADIN D'ANGLURE 1990.

metamorphosis of the environment (including the emergence of femalehood, day and night, and the seasons), often initialized by human wrongdoing and suffering, new rules of conduct came to pass to shape and help maintain the emerging relationships between humans and the new kinds of being. These processes finally resulted in the world Inuit came to live in as a nomadic hunting society.

The image of this society is captured in modern discourses in the notions of the *inumhariit* ("true Inuit"), whose closest representatives are seen in the elders who grew up living off the land; and of *Inuit qaujimaqatugangit*³, a body of ancestral and constantly updated knowledge that encompasses environmental knowledge, values, rules of conduct, the native language, and skills (see STUCKENBERGER 2007). This multi-dimensional knowledge can be demonstrated by looking at Inuit housing. Depending on the season, location, building material and house design changed, requiring knowledge and skill appertaining to construction and location.

In the past, houses were designed of one room with various spaces that were used for a multitude of activities, such as a raised snow platform in the igloo, used for sleeping during the night and for work during the day. A household's life in this one room required coordination. Rules of proper conduct, such as self-control, respect, and modesty helped to keep people happy and to avoid conflict; the division of labor and work collaboration within and between households sustained the household's economy. Both proper conduct and subsistence economic practices also connected the household to the larger cosmological domain of the sentient environment, spirit and animal beings. Whatever happened within the household and the house had direct bearings on the functioning of people's relationships with this domain. For example, if a camp harbored continuing conflicts, the game might decide to withdraw leaving the humans without food.

It, thus, appears that Inuit have perceived of their houses as part of this socio-cosmic evolution in which all beings shared the same original spiritual essence in form of an *inua* ("soul", "spirit inhabitant") embodied first by sky and land. Rasmussen (1929: 254f) provided us with the following story from Igloodik that supports this interpretation:

When it had grown light on earth, human beings lived in the same way as they do now. They lived by pursuing game, and chose for preference places where there was abundance of game. It was far easier then to move from one place to another than it is now, for every household had its own particular *inua*, its own spirit, which, when the household wished to move to another place, shifted the whole house with all the people in it and all their household goods, away to the spot where they wished to be. [i.e: houses could also move on their own accord] (INUGPASUGJUK, IGLOODIK 1922).

³ Editors' note: suggested translation "Inuit long-standing knowledge still meaningful today." See "Concerning Inuit Orality, introduction to the Proceedings".

Inugpasuhjuk also pointed out that houses could move on their own accord, too. It appears, thus, that people believed that houses had their own *inua* as well as that this *inua* was closely related to the inhabiting household.

Inuit housing in modern permanent settlements

In the late 1950s until today, the Canadian Government basically changed its policy of non-interference to one of acculturation of the Inuit people. The construction of centralized permanent settlements conceived based on a Western model of community life was seen as a strategic opportunity for Inuit to gain experience in new forms of social organization introduced by settlement living and modernization (THOMAS & THOMPSON 1972: 9)⁴. The housing program included both the construction of permanent houses as well as the education of Inuit in the proper use of space and maintenance. Given that the traditional house united in its design and use principles and values of Inuit cosmology and lifeways choosing housing as a means of acculturation was a potentially very powerful tool to engineer culture change.

The Nunavut community of Qikiqtarjuaq (formerly Broughton Island) was a small camp before the housing program was implemented there in the 1960s. Having originally been a hunting camp, it was already growing into a larger community in association with a Distant Early Warning Station signifying the Cold War era before the permanent settlement was established. With the initialization of the housing program, camps and smaller communities in the regions were closed down, and people moved or were moved to Qikiqtarjuaq.

Just like other settlements constructed in that period, Qikiqtarjuaq was planned by a southern contractor according to aesthetic and practical considerations that emphasized western models of community life but also tried to include Inuit elements, for example by designating certain areas for dog-team installments. Prefabricated two or three bedroom houses came in a variety of one-or two level (the latter much disliked) models. The prevalent one-room housing was gradually replaced by multiple-space layouts that aimed to connected specific functions to specific spaces, such as bedrooms for sleeping, kitchens and dining rooms for meal preparation and consumption, and the living room for leisure activities and socializing – rather than letting functions and rules define what a space at a given moment in time is meant to be as was practiced in the one-room designs imagined organically in analogy to a human body and the cosmological order. The new houses were

⁴ Thomas and Thompson's report on the implementation of the housing program is noteworthy for their critical awareness of the relevance of traditional knowledge in making cooperative projects between Inuit and administrators successful.

designed for permanent all-year use independent of the seasonal cycle and situational environmental conditions; the installments of a supermarket, freight connections by air and ship, a health care facility, a school, and employment opportunities supported and promoted a more permanent life style (STUCKENBERGER 2005)⁵.

Linguistic and ethnographic evidence suggests, however, that while the changes in Inuit social and physical living conditions were drastic, Inuit perceptions and use of houses did change little. Bordin (2003) found that the vocabulary associated with the pre-settlement housing is also largely used for the new housing⁶. Adjustments are made in various ways whenever necessary often emphasizing descriptively the shape rather than the function of new spaces. Bordin argues that through the lexicon, the igloo of the past is projected onto or present in the modern housing. While the transfer of older terms to the new context may suggest but does not necessarily predict a continuity in cultural perceptions and lifeways, I found that Inuit actually also continue to pursue a nomadic lifestyle and cultural identity as hunters within the context of sedentary conditions (STUCKENBERGER 2005, 2006, 2007a, b).

Inuit continue to follow a seasonal cycle of staying predominantly in the settlement during late fall, winter, and late spring and of traveling to their hunting and fishing camps during the other seasons. There, they either construct multi-year cabins of plywood or pitch tents. These constructions are similar to and used in similar ways as Inuit housing in the past. Values associated with being in camp and out on the land are very positive and usually strongly connected to notions of being “close to true Inuit life,” “a healing environment in which one can let go of worries that concern life in the settlement,” and a “closeness to God.” In many ways, thus, being out camping is valued as a kind of timeless space in which the past is strongly perceptible as part of the present.

From the same contemporary vantage point, the settlement is associated with ambivalent values. These values partly stand in contrast to those associated with being out on the land with one’s family. In the context of settlement life it is not so much the family, but the large-scale communality that is emphasized and just like camping carried the positive value of “tradition.” And while being out on the camp is associated with “healing” and an increase in wellbeing, modern settlement life that is characterized by large group sizes and relative permanency of composition (for example, conflicts cannot easily be avoided by moving away due to housing shortage and unemployment) is often thought to be destructive for the individual and the community’s wellbeing. Inuit communities indeed

⁵ For a discussion of housing in contemporary Inuit communities see also COLLIGNON 2001 and DAWSON 2006 and 2008.

⁶ On the other hand Collignon (2001), working on similar issues with Inuinnait elderly women found that such vocabulary transposition had almost not happened in that region. There, the Inuinnait created a new set of words to describe the various parts and elements of their new homes.

have to deal with serious social difficulties that include high suicide rates, domestic violence, drug abuse, and high rates of unemployment and school drop out.

Still, Inuit adopted, adapted to, and generally like living in permanent houses that provide more comfort and security than the dwellings of the past. And most of the people of Qikiqtarjuaq do not consider their houses as alien but as part of their lifeways. My discussion of Inuit perceptions and practices regarding houses and households in the settlement makes use of two sets of data that I collected during my fieldwork between 1999 and 2001: (1) ethnographic observations of Inuit household life; and (2) an interview with Sami Qappik on his conversion from Anglican to Pentecostal Christianity in which he perceived of his house, his body, his family, his identity and his spiritual relationship as interconnected and therewith resonating past Inuit beliefs and practices within the context not only of contemporary community life but also within the context of the relative recent arrival of the Pentecostal movement in the Arctic starting to be successful in southern Baffin Island around the early 1980s.

(1) Ethnographic observations

Looking for aspects of continuity and change in Inuit perceptions and use of houses that followed their moves from shamanistic beliefs to Christianity in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, from a nomadic to a permanent settlement context, and from a subsistence to a mixed economy within a Western ideological framework, I will summarize my findings from field research in a comparative perspective. For a more descriptive and detailed account I refer the interested reader to Stuckenberger (2005).

In my field study I found that:

- Household compositions continue to be dynamic as family members move in and out for various reasons. Usually husband, wife, and young biological or adopted children form the most stable part of the household. It is therefore as problematic to speak of Inuit households as corporate units as it has been in the past of seasonal hunting camps.
- Most households are based on close kinship relations. The social position and work contributions of people living together in a house depends on their gender, age and kinship relation.
- Most houses are crowded and rooms have a variety of functions rather than the functions designated to them formally. While there is little privacy in Inuit homes, it is usually quiet and people take care not to disturb each other in their occupations. (Thus, rules of conduct shape how a space is used rather than the rules associated with the functions that a room was meant to fulfill).

- Spaces, such as the kitchen, were adapted to Inuit and western use. For example, many families meet for lunch at the table during the noon school and work break to have a sandwich, pasta, soup and the like. At the same time, many families provide country food presented on a piece of cardboard on the kitchen floor for everyone, household member or visitor, to help themselves whenever they desire to eat. People have their snacks, bought during the evening at one of the convenient stores, either at the kitchen table or in the living room.
- Movement continues not only to be a pronounced feature of households, but also a highly valued feature in the seasonal cycle of camping and residence in the settlement practiced in Qikiqtarjuaq. While those movements are less clear-cut as they were in the past – people sometimes only go hunting during the weekends due to school or employment obligations or they stay in the settlement if they lack funding for traveling – many Inuit perceive that participating in this cycle of moving with the animals and the shifts between being with one's family or the larger community is really a part of themselves.

These points show that while used and in general valued, the physical structure, design, and furnishings of a house originating from Western living traditions not so much modernized Inuit lifeways, but were indigenized to fit local seasonal and social values and practices. Meanwhile, not all features of a house are incorporated in such a way. Some people expressed discomfort with having the children sleeping in isolated bedrooms, and particularly rooms upstairs were not much liked and often used only reluctantly. Many people were not comfortable with them in a general way (people made lots of jokes teasing me with building two story igloos to accommodate southern folks), others felt that upstairs rooms were likely to be haunted by malevolent spirits. As houses are often crowded, all space is usually used. The permanence of the houses was perceived as comfortable, but also as a problem, because the bad conduct of its earlier or current inhabitants (ranging from suicide to violence, to drug abuse) were felt to linger on, some of them in form of spirits, disturbing family life. Many people requested the local lay ministers to spiritually cleanse and anoint their homes to renew them and make them livable spaces. This connection between the house and its inhabitants is a pronounced feature in the following account of a Pentecostal conversion.

(2) The house is part of a Pentecostal conversion experience

The relevance of propriety is based on Inuit perceptions that improper conduct, social or spiritual, has an immediate effect on the well-being of a person, his or her family, and the community. Functioning relationships are crucial for the maintenance of Inuit society that is still strongly based on cooperation and temporary relationships (STUCKENBERGER 2005). In Qikiqtarjuaq, often Christian practices are employed to deal with social and spiritual

difficulties. It is within this framework of reference that Sami Qappik told me his own story of “healing” through conversion into a reborn Christian. The following are excerpts from his story:

I saw my life, how I lived it and then I saw a life that was, wow, that was beautiful. In my life I used to do drugs, alcohol, little bit of gambling, sometimes break and enter ... My mother was a lay reader. I told her I had these dreams to commit suicide and to pray to Satan, all sorts of stuff. When I did all sorts of drugs, my life was not happy. When you are not happy, your room seems to be very dark. There is no joy and happiness. Your body feels down, the whole house is fuzzy and grey. The house follows that person. If parents argue a lot and they don't think about their kids; [this is] one reason why young people commit suicide. If the mother is good, but the father drinks alcohol or takes drugs, his speech gets sharp. When somebody answers, it sparks a fire. It brings a thing to the house. (SAMI QAPPIK 2000)

Sami Qappik believed in a connection between his problems and the condition of his house and specifically its illumination. Many people in Qikiqtarjuaq shared the experience that the “house follows the person” and also that the house tends to get darker when the household faced serious problems or if the presence of a demon was felt. The oldest member of the community, Mialia Audlakiak, for instance, was looking for a new house. She made clear that she was looking for a place where nobody had committed suicide, where no drugs were used, etc. Houses thus afflicted would not provide good living conditions.

The perception that “the house follows the person” is not new to Inuit. For their nomadic ancestors, the house was the focal point of family and social life. The comfort of being together in this space was to a large degree dependent on the success of the hunter, since he provided the household with seals widely used for food and oil needed to run the *qulliq* (‘seal-oil lamp’) for light, warmth and cooking heat (see also BOAS 1888: 574). Houses also had been the location of shamanic rituals, for instance to improve hunting success, cure sickness, and to deal with transgressions of ritual injunctions. In many rituals, manipulations of the *qulliq* had been part of the performance. For instance, at certain points in the ritual its light was lowered or turned bright. The *qulliq* also needed to be dealt with in specific ways if a death had occurred (BOAS 1901: 144f.). Indeed, light and darkness were central features in Inuit shamanic practices. Having acquired a special “light” to his vision provided the shaman with the ability to see souls. Darkness provided him with the ability to remain “hidden” (LAUGRAND, OOSTEN, TRUDEL 2000: 108).

Light and darkness were also embodied by spirit beings. Ollie Ittinuaq, a north-Baffin elder, shared his knowledge of helping spirits in an interview with Henry Kablalik and Frédéric Laugrand, in 1999. He said: “They both have light, the bad and the good. The only difference is that the bad spirit’s light is dimmer. The inside of the black spirit might be dark (black). The inside of a good spirit can be white although the outside can be dark”

(LAUGRAND, OOSTEN, TRUDEL 2000: 94). The house, just like the person of the shaman and spirits, expresses spiritual and social conditions in form of light and darkness. Furthermore, the house was believed not only to reflect conditions, but also, if treated properly, to protect its inhabitants from dangerous spiritual beings, such as the evil spirits of the dead (BOAS 1888: 590f.)

Thus, Sami Qappik belief in the interrelation between his house, its inhabitants, and their social and cosmological relationships has a long tradition – and is of practical relevance. Becoming aware of his spiritual and social problems, Sami decided to deal both with his difficulties and with his house. He wanted happiness and light to return to his home and to his life:

I said let someone go and pray to my house. There were three people, besides my mother: two lay-readers and a reverend [Loasie Kunilusie]. They prayed for me first. I prayed with them. Loasie told me that after he prayed for me, my house would be prayed for. Something unusual came out from me. I heard a noise coming out from me very fast. Like 'wwwrrmm'. The people praying didn't hear it, but I heard it. Maybe an angel took it away from me. I never experienced something like it. That was unspeakable. There was warmth all around my body, a warmth that made me happy. My underarms were warm. It was not me. It was different, unspeakable. My heart was warm. A small little light was going through the room, entering my heart. My heart was burning. I started crying, sitting on the couch. I rarely cried before. They started to pray on the house. Making crosses on the walls, using tap water which they spoke prayers about. (SAMI QAPPIK 2000)

The effects of the treatments were immediately perceptible to all those present:

After finishing praying for the house, my mother told me to see my room. The lights were on, but it was brighter than normal. It seems there were no shadows, that bright. That was the glory of God in my room. My mother told me to go to the other room, which was lit only by one bulb that was not very bright. This room was also brighter. The glory of God shone in the whole house. The same in the living room. (SAMI QAPPIK 2000)

Having been released of his spiritual burden and the unwanted presence of dangerous spiritual beings, he became gifted a sharpening of his senses and of his intellectual, emotional, and spiritual insights. The experiences of the evening not only changed his perceptions of himself and of his home, but also his perceptions of other houses and the settlement, of social relations, and of religious practices and beliefs:

I walked out in a different community, I saw a different house. I had always walked face down. I saw perfect corners at houses, corners in windows, which were perfect. My inside was so happy, every person seemed to be happy to me ... That Sunday, when they read the same stuff, the words became alive. They touched my heart. I just cried. ... I started to feel for people. I know when they need help; I know their pain; I can feel it. (SAMI QAPPIK 2000)

Looking back, Sami found that his experiences were not unique: “I never experienced exactly the same, but something similar, when we prayed for a house. For example for a troubled family, suicidal youth, people, who cannot sleep, because they feel a presence or being watched.” Sami Qappik has become a youth minister within the Anglican Church that increasingly incorporates Pentecostal beliefs and practices in many Inuit communities. Sami’s [“]healing[”] experience became to him part of his Pentecostal conversion into a “reborn Christian,” a spiritual and social transformation introduced in the Baffin region in the 1980s and since then adopted by large numbers of Inuit who believe this to be a way to deal with their personal as well as communal social and spiritual difficulties (see STUCKENBERGER 2007a).

The house is perceived as a focal location of family life as well as a focal location of social life, and a place for religious practices. As indicated by Sami Qappik’s expression of “the house follows the person,” the house is thought to be affected by the quality of the social and spiritual relationships of its inhabitants. In a way, it represents the group of its inhabitants. It is not enough to [“]heal[”] a member of the household, but also the house, representing the household, has to be treated. Only then can the individual again be functional in a larger social context.

Housing cosmological relationships

As in the past, the dynamically constituted household is a central constituent in the formation of the hunting community. The house is a representation of its inhabitants and their relationship to each other and to the realm of spirits. Maintaining proper relationships is of great relevance to the Inuit hunting culture. Within today’s Christian framework, many Inuit continue to view the evolution of their society as situated within a cosmological creation that interconnects their environment and their lifestyle. This is often formulated in the belief that hunting out on the land for the animals God has created for them is the true vocation of Inuit life past and present. As nature is not the “Other” to society in this context, a functioning relationship of people to the land and animals is often perceived to be a necessary precondition for people’s well-being.

Conclusion

As Inuit continue to perceive of themselves as a hunting society, it is beneficial to maintain a nomadic life style that connects the land and the community. Game animals are believed to require that all relationships of a hunter are functional, if and when they accept to be killed. Only if the household and close kin relationships are functional can other social relations also be functional.

Life in the settlement, while carrying traditional values of being together with everyone during some part of the year, also created new and great difficulties in social life as addressed above. The house in itself embodies the ambivalent values associated with the settlement. While used in a nomadic fashion and viewed as imbued with sentience and the capacity to express itself on the condition the household is in, it is also an element of the Western sedentary life-style that is believed to have negative impacts on people's well-being. Some aspects of the house, such as its spatial assignments and social organization and values inscribed to its spatial structures appear difficult to appropriate. While the house may represent "the igloo" of the past, it also represents the struggle of incorporating or declining new elements of modern and Western lifeways, while maintaining a holistic society.

The new ritual of Pentecostal transformation is perceived as a process leading to social restoration while affirming many aspects of modernity, such as a school education, state authority and institutions, and a Western ambiance of comfort and affluence – houses of Inuit Pentecostal leaders are usually more richly furnished and decorated than houses of most followers as well as houses of traditional Anglican Inuit (see STUCKENBERGER 2007b).

The house in its character of being a traditional agent as well as an "object" introducing values of permanency and modernity, was actively involved in the process of Sami's social and spiritual transformation that "healed" him from destruction associated with the conditions of contemporary settlement life as well as situated him as a member of a global and modern Pentecostal movement. In this transformation, the house, thus, also supported and gave expression to the incorporation of new elements (global connections, some modern values, such as schooling, and economic affluence) that are outside the scope of the traditional Inuit cosmology connecting society to the local land and knowledge appertaining to it. It may have brought the house in its embodied but often not locally applied aspects of Western notions of social relationships and interactions closer to be part of contemporary Inuit lifeways.

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