Thunder on the tundra: Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit of the Bathurst caribou

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ABSTRACT

Thunder on the Tundra is a testament to the time-tested knowledge of the Qitirmiut, whose nature can be discerned from the lore of caribou hunting and use. The knowledge is related to and contained within this group of people, who live in a specific geographic region. It informs and is formed by their cosmology or worldview, and thus it is intimately linked to the spiritual and ethical fabric, which manifests itself daily in practical expressions. For example, the etiquette of hunting and the idea of inter-household sharing in the community are closely connected to subsistence harvesting of caribou. Qitirmiut knowledge is cumulative, based on the sacredness of the past or tradition. This does not mean that tradition is fixed in a particular time or age. In fact, it is dynamic and adaptive: the Qitirmiut perceive not only the pastness of the past, but its presence, and new ideas and approaches are quickly adopted if they are seen as beneficial to the group. As a result, neither the knowledge nor its holders are homogeneous. The degree to which an individual within the Qitirmiut may hold this knowledge varies with age, gender, economic condition, and even interest in the subject, creating very permeable boundaries for its generation and transmission. Qitirmiut knowledge arises from closeness to the land and relationships with living things. In this sense, it is performative in nature, being obtained by the labour of living and the experience of subsistence hunting. Qitirmiut knowledge has an empirical trait: it is extensive knowledge of the land on which the caribou live and reproduce.

FULL TEXT


Thunder on the Tundra is a refreshing collaboration that documents knowledge of the Qitirmiut (Inuit of the Kitikmeot region of Nunavut) about their relationship with the caribou herds that pass through their homelands. The book seeks to satisfy multiple objectives. First, it responds to a lacuna of information about caribou herds and calving in the Bathurst Inlet region. Second, it documents and shares information on caribou harvesting within and beyond the community. Third, it seeks to transfer the knowledge of the diminishing number of elders familiar with harvest and uses of the caribou to the next generation of young Qitirmiut. Finally, the documentation of subsistence harvesting has direct implications on planning for exploitation of non-renewable natural resources (for example, mining). Therefore, the audience of this publication ranges from community members, including Qitirmiut youth, to public policy makers and professionals interested in northern indigenous cultures.

Written in a language that is accessible to high school students, community members, and scholars of indigenous cultures, the book also uses maps, drawings by elders and youth, and photographs to convey Inuit oral tradition on paper. Describing the significance of the caribou to the Qitirmiut, Thunder on the Tundra examines the human ecology (the cultural values guiding the hunting, traditional use, and preparation of caribou); the various predators
of the caribou; migratory patterns and reproduction of the different caribou herds; and the effects of climate change. Unlike many anthropological studies of indigenous communities, this work speaks in the voice of the community rather than from the point of view of an outside expert. Since the work involved collaboration with elders, hunters, and even youth, the voice of the researchers is not distinguished from that of the community at large. Images and quotations are well incorporated into the text, producing a seamless narrative flow. The intellectual property rights rest firmly with the people from whom this knowledge was obtained. While many northern scholars in universities give lip service to participatory research, this publication achieves it in both form and substance. The community set the research agenda to share a corpus of information based on indigenous knowledge of the caribou; it provided researchers as well as informants; it gave advice through a community advisory group; and then it produced the book.

Thunder on the Tundra is a testament to the time-tested knowledge of the Qitirmiut, whose nature can be discerned from the lore of caribou hunting and use. The knowledge is related to and contained within this group of people, who live in a specific geographic region. It informs and is formed by their cosmology or worldview, and thus it is intimately linked to the spiritual and ethical fabric, which manifests itself daily in practical expressions. For example, the etiquette of hunting and the idea of inter-household sharing in the community are closely connected to subsistence harvesting of caribou. Qitirmiut knowledge is cumulative, based on the sacredness of the past or tradition. This does not mean that tradition is fixed in a particular time or age. In fact, it is dynamic and adaptive: the Qitirmiut perceive not only the pastness of the past, but its presence, and new ideas and approaches are quickly adopted if they are seen as beneficial to the group. As a result, neither the knowledge nor its holders are homogeneous. The degree to which an individual within the Qitirmiut may hold this knowledge varies with age, gender, economic condition, and even interest in the subject, creating very permeable boundaries for its generation and transmission. Qitirmiut knowledge arises from closeness to the land and relationships with living things. In this sense, it is performative in nature, being obtained by the labour of living and the experience of subsistence hunting. Qitirmiut knowledge has an empirical trait: it is extensive knowledge of the land on which the caribou live and reproduce.

The value of presenting the knowledge of the Qitirmiut in this format is that it allows the younger generation to integrate the traditional knowledge system with that of modern science, drawing benefit from both. In fact, the best biology course or ecology field school that Qitirmiut youth can take is in their homeland. They learn directly from the seasonal rhythms and the tapestry of biotic and abiotic relationships on the land of their ancestors. Thunder on the Tundra can be the introductory text to such an integration of knowledge and experience.

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DETAILS

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