

## **Silatuniq: Respectful state of being in the world** **Silatuniq : une façon respectueuse d'être au monde**

Betsy Annahatak

Volume 38, Number 1-2, 2014

Cultures inuit, gouvernance et cosmopolitiques  
Inuit cultures, governance and cosmopolitics

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1028851ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1028851ar>

[See table of contents](#)

### Publisher(s)

Association Inuksiutiit Katimajit Inc.  
Centre interuniversitaire d'études et de recherches autochtones (CIÉRA)

### ISSN

0701-1008 (print)

1708-5268 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

### Cite this article

Annahatak, B. (2014). *Silatuniq: Respectful state of being in the world*. *Études/Inuit/Studies*, 38(1-2), 23–31. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1028851ar>

### Article abstract

This paper focuses on *silatuniq*, a mode of being respectful or wise toward all that one encounters and interacts with in the world. Based on my personal background, I try to explain how Inuit in my region were culturally raised from childhood to adulthood to acquire values, skills, and knowledge to become competent in our society. This article is the result of my lifelong experience of having lived during a phase of cultural transition, from hunting camps to community life, then having lived as a student during the introduction of mainstream schooling in Kangirsuk, and finally working as an educator to make changes in Inuit education. A diagram illustrates how *silatuniq*, a sign of maturity, can be visualized as the central goal of the development of Inuit children as they acquire interrelated customary values and cultural rules. Hopefully this goal can apply to today's Inuit schooling.

# *Silatuniq*: Respectful state of being in the world

---

**Betsy Annahatak\***

**Résumé:** *Silatuniq*: une façon respectueuse d'être au monde

Le sujet de cet article est le *silatuniq*, une façon d'être respectueuse ou sage envers tout ce que l'on peut rencontrer, ou tout ce avec quoi l'on peut interagir, dans le monde. En me basant sur mon histoire personnelle, je tente d'expliquer la façon dont les Inuit de ma région étaient élevés, de l'enfance à l'âge adulte, dans une culture leur permettant d'acquérir des valeurs, des savoir-faire et des connaissances leur conférant les compétences nécessaires à la vie dans notre société. Cet article résulte de toute une vie d'expérience, puisque j'ai vécu la phase de la transition culturelle, depuis les camps de chasse jusqu'à la vie communautaire; puis j'ai connu la vie d'étudiante au moment de l'apparition des programmes scolaires classiques, s'appliquant à tous de la même façon, à Kangirsuk, avant de travailler comme éducatrice pour contribuer aux changements dans le système d'éducation des Inuit. Un schéma montre la façon dont le *silatuniq*, un signe de maturité, peut être visualisé comme l'objectif essentiel du développement des enfants inuit dans leur acquisition des valeurs coutumières et des règles culturelles, toutes liées entre elles. J'ai l'espoir que cet objectif pourra être atteint dans la scolarité des Inuit d'aujourd'hui.

**Abstract:** *Silatuniq*: Respectful state of being in the world

This paper focuses on *silatuniq*, a mode of being respectful or wise toward all that one encounters and interacts with in the world. Based on my personal background, I try to explain how Inuit in my region were culturally raised from childhood to adulthood to acquire values, skills, and knowledge to become competent in our society. This article is the result of my lifelong experience of having lived during a phase of cultural transition, from hunting camps to community life, then having lived as a student during the introduction of mainstream schooling in Kangirsuk, and finally working as an educator to make changes in Inuit education. A diagram illustrates how *silatuniq*, a sign of maturity, can be visualized as the central goal of the development of Inuit children as they acquire interrelated customary values and cultural rules. Hopefully this goal can apply to today's Inuit schooling.

---

\* P.O. Box 103, Kangirsuk, Quebec J0M 1A0, Canada. Betsy.annahatak@hotmail.ca

## Introduction

I was born just outside Kangirsuk, Nunavik, on the east coast of the Ungava Peninsula. At the time, my family still lived on the land, moving from one seasonal camp to the next. My late father, Sam Willie Annahatak, was the camp leader of five families. There are a few things that I want to mention from my memories about his leadership. My father used to organize and lead long trips to hunt caribou, walrus, and other game animals. He would also build big family-size igloos, and shack houses for extended families. Wherever necessary, he would transport families to and from their seasonal camps by dog team and by boat, providing food for the camps. My father would also train young men by bringing them on his hunting trips. He himself built and managed the first commercial fishing camp for Kangirsuk. At times, he would receive visitors from other camps and counsel people on social disputes. He was also considered a lead guide, transporting European tourists by dog team.

Back then, during my childhood, I never heard the word “leader” used to describe my father’s role in our camp. We just lived according to our ways with no comparisons to another culture. We learned by listening to people, as my mother clearly stated one day. My late beloved mother used to have the hunting radio, the TV, and the local FM radio, all on at the same time, while still being very present in our family interactions. Having been schooled in the mainstream education system, my sister and I once commented to her that she did not have to listen to someone she disagreed with, and who was passionately talking on the community radio about religion. Only years later did I understand what she had meant in reply. “If you do not learn to listen and interpret people and their ideas, you will allow yourself to be led wrong in life” (Velešie Annahatak, pers. comm. 1990s). Thus one learns and grows to become a leader for one’s inner being, the self.

In this short essay, I will first reflect on my lifelong experience, and then as an educator in Kangirsuk. Finally, I will explain the notion of *silatuniq* in more detail and show how essential it is to understand Inuit leadership and values.

## From camp to community

Having lived in a camp during early childhood, I witnessed how the social structure of our life changed from a very ordered system to a fragmented or dismantled one. As I remember it, our way of living together was very well structured and interconnected. For example, we had to listen to and respect our parents, our elders, and people older than us. If anyone was not well, either physically or emotionally, they were looked after. Those without parents to learn from were taken care of like one’s own children. People who caused problems, social disputes, or harm to others were counseled.

Then in the early 1960s we moved to Kangirsuk, which then was a trading post. Institutions, such as schools, nursing stations, police stations, and other centres, were

built and developed to run community life. This resulted in the breakdown of our social network. With such a rapid transition there was no time to filter through and transform some of our cultural ways and reasonings into the new lifestyle. Inuit of my age group, who lived through that transition, were caught trying to live according to two lifestyles, as described by Dorais (1997: 104). As these institutions introduced new concepts, values, and goals, there was a breakdown in common understanding of basic cultural values, life goals, principles, and communication skills. With our society going through change, so too did the role of our leaders. As Annie Hanson (2010: 67) wrote “The absence of Inuit leadership caused a lot of social problems.” The foreign institutions, with their new forms of leadership, could not coach and mentor each Inuk to work toward building the identity, maturity, and wisdom needed to become well balanced for the new age.

I have integrated into this paper the insights developed from my studies and my upbringing. I used these insights in my Master’s thesis, which drew on qualitative research that included interviews and reflective journals about my old and new encounters in life (Annahatak 1998). The journals were written over many years, becoming a study of myself and how I felt and reacted to new foreign encounters in my life. I was able to validate my method, the study of self and my culture, when I came upon an article by Francine Hultgren (1993: 21): “Hermeneutics—a research approach incorporating lived interpretation of experiences [...]. Defined as a philosophy and theory of understanding that have to do with one’s way of being-in-the-world [...]. Historical encounters which call forth personal experiences of being-in-the-world with others.” Although hermeneutics implies a slightly different perspective, this statement by Hultgren was very meaningful for me.

Over the years I have sought to understand Inuit ways in culture and education and searched for solutions that can contribute to effective schooling in Nunavik. My questioning has been rooted in my experience of contact with mainstream society since I started school in 1960, beginning with the very simple task of identifying differences between the mainstream and Inuit culture and from there proceeding to a higher level of what constitutes the cultural core of Inuit ways from my region. This questioning led me to focus on my value system,<sup>1</sup> the core of self, and our mode of being.

### **Inuit socialization from childhood to adulthood**

As children we were loved, nurtured, and raised from birth to become our own self. From a very early age we were conditioned not only to learn and grow to be ourselves but also to live in harmony with others. We were raised, cared for, guided, and coached not just by our parents but also by our whole extended families and our camp elders. We learned by participating in the daily activities of our families. Our upbringing was similar to that described by Ruth Paradise in her study on Mazahua

---

<sup>1</sup> The term “Inuit values” in this paper will refer to *ajuqiigusiit*, the customary cultural rules that Inuit learn from childhood to adulthood.

children and their upbringing in Mexico. Her article focuses on the observations she made of “Mazahua children learning to be separate-but-together” with their caretakers while acquiring “culturally specific meanings and values” (Paradise 1994: 163). Anthropologists and researchers have revealed some deep cultural elements of Inuit culture that have helped me to relate to our upbringing and our ways. There are many examples of research work about the socialization of Inuit children, including Briggs (1970, 1998, 2000) and Crago (1988).

Inuit go through several developmental stages during a lifetime, as shown on Figure 1. On the first shaded section outside the circle, we find 1) Inuit childrearing practices, 2) kinship and family relations, 3) cultural style of communication and interactions, and 4) social organization and society. These are examples of socializing agents for Inuit children from infancy to adulthood. They are the means by which cultural ways and values are passed on.

On the second shaded section of the diagram are some examples of key interrelated customary Inuit rules and values to be acquired. These are in fact the very processes, among many, that help an individual reach maturity.

1) Helpfulness / *Tautuangaittuuniq*. When one sees someone in need of help, one should be quick to assist in any situation.

2) Obedience / *Naalanniq*. The term in this diagram is used very broadly and refers to obeying Inuit customary rules and values that our caretakers have transmitted to us as a guide to life. It can also refer to religious rules or commandments, national, provincial, and municipal rules and laws, or any rules of institutions.

3) Observant / *Nausatsiarunnaniq*, Attentive / *Ippigijaqatsianiq*, and Awareness / *Qaujimagasuatsianiq*. These are progressively acquired skills for social and spiritual survival in one’s environment.

On the third shaded section of the diagram are the following:

4) Respectful mode of being / *Silatuniq piniarnilimaamigut*. It will be addressed in the next section of this paper.

5) Self-disciplined / *Apuusingaittuuniq*. Being cautious about upcoming encounters in life. Having a mindset that is prepared for any situation one may encounter. Also, being wise in how one talks and responds and being farsighted, for example, by sewing clothes or making tools for the next season.

6) Interactive mode of being (openness) / *Ilaliursigunnaniq*. Being open to new encounters. This promotes a thinking skill that does not limit the learner but instead enriches his/her ways of thinking. In this thinking mode the individual can interact with the surrounding world by questioning and thinking: an *openness to renewing concepts*. One is thus more likely to be creative and imaginative.

There are more Inuit values not addressed in this paper, such as being compassionate toward others / *ilatjugusugunnaniq*, being socially accommodating / *inuuqatiqatsianiq*, avoiding destructive talk about others / *uqajautiqattailiniq*, never acting proudly in a way that would put someone down / *nalangailisaanginiq*, and many more. In the centre of the diagram are values that relate to maturity: *isummatuq*, *silattutuq*. At this level the individual has acquired a respectful state of being in all ways. In a constructive way, *silattutuq* is the sign of becoming mature.

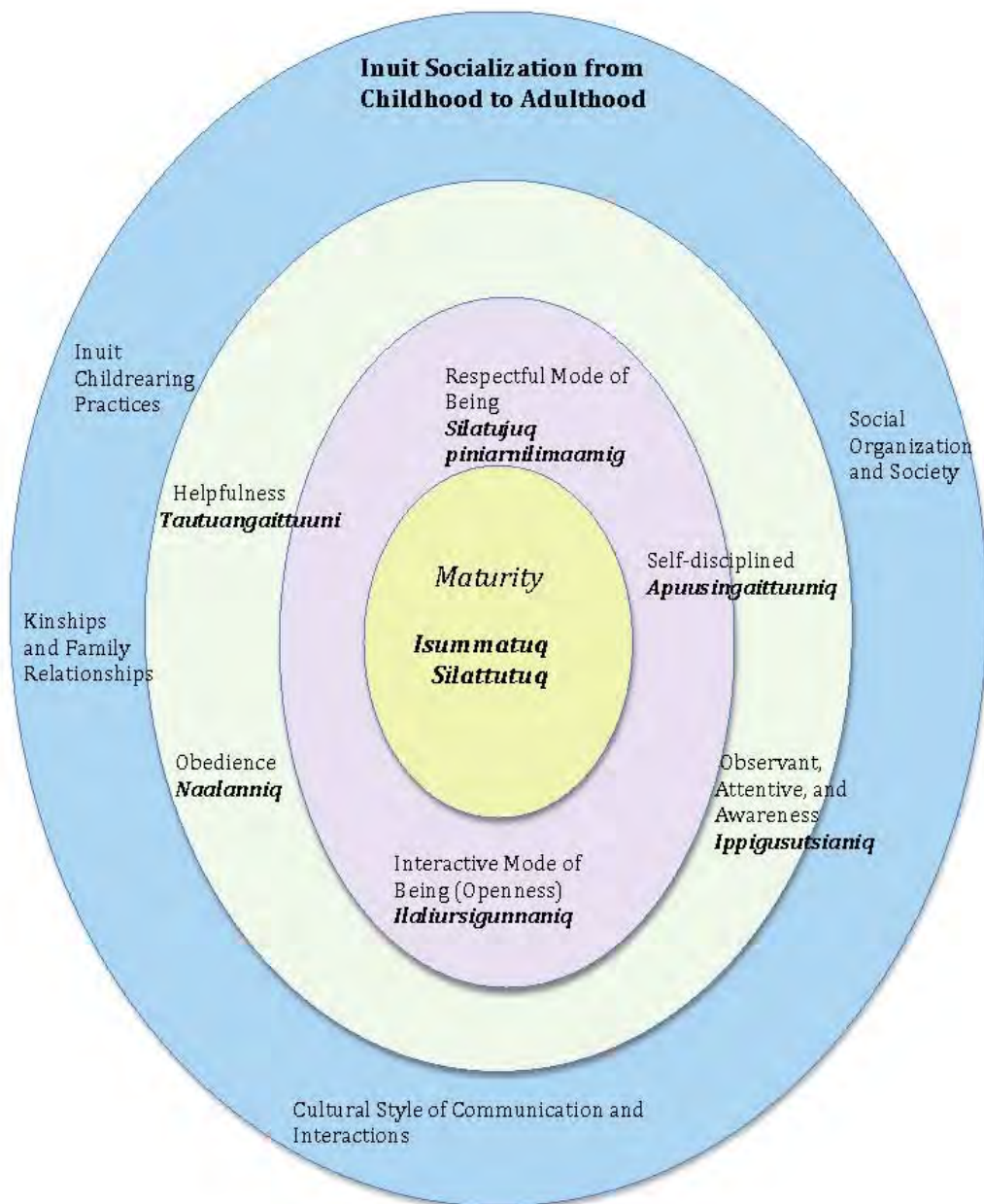


Figure 1. Becoming an Inuit adult / *Isummapalliani q silattupalliani q*.

## Understanding *silatuniq*

When I interviewed the late Peter Marik Airo, who was recognized as being a well-balanced, mature, and wise man in our community, he defined the word *silatujuq* as follows:

*Inuugasuanimuulingjurigakku, silamullu, silatujutsianguluni, qanurlu inuuqatiminik silatujuuluni pinirlirajituinnaugunnailuni, silatujuuluni* ('*Silatujuq*—I understand it to be about living, also toward outside, Sila, being wise in every way, not to put others under any kind of harm or (danger), to be wise') (Airo 1996).<sup>2</sup>

To reach maturity in our region is to achieve *isummatuq* or *silattutuq*, a cultural mode of being. To reach that state one becomes wise, *silattutuq*. The literal translation of *silatujuq* would be 'one who has a big world' (my interpretation). One's understanding of the world includes the interconnections of all beings in it (Annahatak 1998: 17). As Airo said, "being wise in every way" includes how you talk, act, and think "to avoid harm." In this state of being, people are respectful in all their ways and interactions with everything in the world. Our fellow Inuit, the Yupiit of Alaska, from interviews with their elders, say that the word "*Ancurturyaraq* (being cautious and reserved) is a way of being respectful" (Fienup-Riordan 2005: 59).

A distant cousin of mine, Ida Watt, originally from Inukjuaq and now living in Kuukjuaq, coached me with words to reflect on in life (*iqqaratsaliursuni*). Her mentoring started from the premise that Inuit who observe, listen, and obey (customary cultural rules) will make fewer mistakes in life than those who are less obedient (*Inuit naalatsiatuviniit ajuqittutaugutinik inuusirmi tammakattanginnisausuut taikkunanngat naalanningittunit*) (Ida Watt, pers. comm. 1998).

But a new factor is making us, the younger generation, ignorant of our values and ways: the different phases of colonization throughout our short history of contact with mainstream society. My mother used to say, "Our children are now being interfered." I interpret that to imply that their learning of Inuit values and ways, to become mature and strong, is being interfered with. This is similar to the notion that it takes longer now for Inuit youth to reach maturity, as stated by Richard Condon in his 1990 article on young people in Holman, Nunavut. He points out some contributing factors; "population concentration, population growth, increased economic security, and exposure to southern values through schooling, television and radio" (Condon 1990: 267).

## What I call "openness"

All the different Inuktitut terms I have mentioned have helped me to interpret the core of self as having been implanted and then developed through interrelated

---

<sup>2</sup> All the English translations are by the author.

customary Inuit rules and values. This core develops to a higher level of maturity through interactive living in the world. With openness one can formulate one's own meaning of life encounters and constantly renew one's understanding of the world. One has to have reached this level to be viable and alive in spirit and to maintain a creative imagination. One then reaches a way of being, an *openness* to relating to other beings in the world. As elder Raiki Augiak, from Kangirsuk, said:

*Silarjuaq maanna Inuqarmat iluunnalimaatsiaraalunginnik iluunnati Ilaliurtualuuvalaumata aulajitsiarakkit ilaliugataugiaqaqqurut* ('The world, as of right now, has people, and toward all of them, our ancestors used to relate to them as I remember that well. We should also relate to others well') (Augiak 1985: 58).

In this state of being, one becomes united with other people by understanding that humans are all the same, especially during their sufferings (*ilatjugusugunnatut*).

### **To be an Inuk today**

I have lived during the later stages of cultural change to our lifestyle, not only witnessing it but also experiencing it passionately and creatively during the transition from hunting camp life to job-oriented community life. I believe Inuit of this time have lived through and modeled a new version of their identity by integrating traditional and modern styles of survival.

By taking elements from both cultures, Inuit and mainstream, our Inuit youth can more easily develop skills and knowledge, and acquire values in order to live vibrantly as Inuit in today's world. To make sense of both the Inuit world (then and now) and the mainstream world, they need to become bi-culturally competent. They need to learn traditional spiritual skills to read signs about life and life encounters, be it strange animal behaviors, dreams, people and their verbal hints, actions, elders' stories, and their teachings. It is with both these skills and the new ones that today's Inuit can reconstruct Inuit society after its fragmentation and dismantlement through colonization. One of the biggest challenges we have today as parents and Inuit educators is to shape the minds of our children for their survival as Inuit.

### **Acknowledgments**

I would like to thank all those who have helped me to grow and learn in my life: my late father, Sam Willie Annahatak, and my late mother, Velesie Grey Annahatak, for their words of coaching and guidance, words for me to remember and use in life (*iqqaratsakanik*), and other such words I got from Ida Watt in 1998 and used in this paper, as well as many more she taught me in life. Also, I thank all the elders and remember them in my heart, among them, my late aunt, Annie Grey, and late Peter Marik Airo. I would like to thank my *angajuk* ('older sister'), Jeannie Nungak, for coaching me about life, *inuusiqatsianirmut*, after our parents left us. I am forever in



debt to my husband, Eugene, and our two sons, Jason and Peter, for being patient while I go about my passions in life, studies, and work, and for still allowing me to be a “mother leader” in the house.

## References

AIRO, M. Peter

1996 Interview transcripts on how Inuit learned in the past, unpublished, in possession of the author.

ANNAHATAK, Betsy

1998 *Exploring the cultural canon through reflective self study*, Master’s thesis, McGill University, Montreal.

AUGIAK, Raiki

1985 *Oral History Files, Collected Texts for the Region of Kangirsuk*, interview transcripts from Avataq Cultural Institute, Nunavik.

BRIGGS, Jean

1970 *Never in anger: Portray of an Eskimo family*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press.

1998 *Inuit Morality Play*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press.

BRIGGS, Jean (ed.)

2000 *Childrearing practices*, Iqaluit, Nunavut Arctic College, Interviewing Inuit Elders, 3.

CONDON, Richard G.

1990 The Rise of Adolescence: Social Change and Life Stage Dilemmas in the Central Canadian Arctic, *Human Organization*, 49(3): 266-279.

CRAGO, Martha M.

1988 *Cultural context in communicative interaction of young Inuit Children*, doctoral dissertation, McGill University, Montreal.

DORAIS, Louis-Jacques

1997 *Quaqtaq: Modernity and Identity in an Inuit Community*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press.

FIENUP-RIORDAN, Ann (ed.)

2005 *Yup’ik Qanruyutait, Yup’ik Words of Wisdom*, translated by Marie Meade and Alice Rearden, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press.

HANSON, Annie M.

2010 Inuit women are natural leaders, in L. McComber and S. Partridge (eds), *Arnait Nipingit, Inuit Women in Leadership and Governance*, Iqaluit, Language and Culture Program of Nunavut Arctic College: 58-71.

HULTGREN, Francine

1993 A Hermeneutic Challenge to the Methodological Mentality in Qualitative Inquiry, *Journal of Vocational Education Research*, 18(2): 21-42.

PARADISE, Ruth

1994 Interactional Style and Nonverbal Meaning: Mazahua Children Learning How to Be Separate-But-Together, *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 25(2): 156-172.