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Emotions Have Many Faces: Inuit Lessons¹

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Abstract: This paper was originally delivered at Memorial University in a distinguished lecture series. The author describes how her lifelong study of Inuit emotional life grew out of her attempt to understand the experience of being ostracized, as a novice anthropologist in an Inuit camp, for inappropriate expression of emotion. After outlining several emotion concepts that are composed differently in Inuktitut and in English, and describing the role played by these concepts in the social relationships of Inuit, the paper describes some important socialization experiences that Inuit children have, which help them to become actors in the emotional plots of Inuit life. In playful mode, adults ask children questions that the child being questioned perceives as personally threatening, and then dramatize the consequences of various answers. In this way, adults create, or raise to consciousness, issues that will be of great consequence for the child's life; and emotions acquire meaning and power through experiential webs of association. Analyzing these phenomena led the author to a growing appreciation of the essential role of emotional dilemmas in Inuit social life; and on the broader plane, it led to a deeper understanding of the constructive power of emotions in social life generally.

Résumé: Ce texte a d'abord été présenté à l'université *Memorial* dans le cadre d'une série de conférences. L'auteure y décrit comment sa vie d'étude de la vie émotionnelle inuit a été déclenchée par le fait qu'elle a été l'objet d'ostracisme, en tant qu'anthropologue débutante dans un camp inuit, pour avoir exprimé des émotions de façon inappropriée. Après l'énumération de plusieurs concepts d'émotions qui sont construits différemment en Inuktitut et en Anglais et la description du rôle joué par ces concepts dans les relations sociales inuit, l'article décrit un certain nombre d'expériences importantes de socialisation qui aident les enfants inuit à participer aux scénarios émotifs de la vie inuit. Dans des jeux, les adultes demandent aux enfants des questions qui sont perçues comme menaçantes, puis ils/elles expriment sur un mode dramatique les diverses conséquences des réponses apportées. De cette façon, les adultes provoquent ou amènent à la conscience des réflexions qui auront une grande importance pour la vie de l'enfant; de plus, les émotions prennent sens et pouvoir en s'associant à toutes sortes d'expériences. Grâce à l'analyse de ces phénomènes l'auteure a pu se rendre compte de la fonction essentielle des dilemmes émotifs dans la vie sociale inuit; et sur un plan plus large, elle est arrivée une meilleure compréhension du pouvoir créateur des émotions dans la vie sociale en général.

I gather that what I'm asked to do today is to tell you a bit about what I do out there in the cold and inhospitable Arctic; and how; and, above all, why (on earth!). Of course, all three of those questions—like most questions worth their salt—have many answers; and the personal and professional are all tangled up in them. I am going to focus on the most powerful learning experience I had as a novice anthropologist 30 years ago, and try to show you what grew out of it.

That experience was to be ostracized by an Inuit family in a remote and tiny camp of fishermen in the depths of the Canadian North (Briggs, 1970).² As an old-fashioned and romantic anthropologist, I had chosen—against strong advice from worried government officials—the most remote camp I could find on the map. Like other anthropologists of that time, I was in search of an exotic world, an escape from the world I grew up in, which I didn't like very much. I wanted to find that “human nature” was not the same the whole world over—that ways of thinking and being were profoundly different in different cultural worlds. More than that, I wanted more options for myself. I wanted to learn to belong in a different world—to learn to be an Inuk (an Eskimo). I liked what I had read as a child about Inuit life and myth; and I loved the wind, the cold, the snow, the silence, and the delicate plant life above treeline—all of which I had experienced as a child on the highest ridges of New Hampshire's mountains. So I arrived in the small Arctic settlement of Gjoa Haven and arranged with the kind help of the Anglican missionaries there—man and wife, both Inuit—to be adopted as a daughter into one of four families who lived in a camp 150 miles away, in a river mouth out in the middle of the tundra.

Unfortunately for my dreams, but fortunately for my professional life, I quickly discovered that it was hard to be an Inuit daughter. It took me a much longer time to discover that I was a Bad daughter from the all-important point of view of my Inuit parents and relatives. I was much more a creature of my own culture than I had real-

ized. One never does realize things until one experiences contrast.

My badness took various forms: I was sometimes slow and ungracious in responding to requests that I stop writing and make tea; I sometimes preferred sitting at home to playing giggly games of tag; and was sometimes reluctant to share supplies if I feared they were being used up too fast. Worst of all, I showed in anti-social ways my displeasure, my anxieties, fatigue, unhappiness. I withdrew into silence; I snapped; I said “No” instead of “Yes.” And after a year—thinking I was being Good this time and feeling very righteous about it—I committed the worst sin of all: I told some visiting American fishermen that my Inuit father didn’t want to lend them his canoe. He had, in fact, earlier, in the privacy of his tent, instructed me to tell them that—but, it turned out, his instructions were wish-fulfilling fantasy. He wanted not to lend his canoe, right enough; he was afraid the fishermen would break it up, as they had broken the only other canoe in the camp. We needed the canoe. Our autumn and winter supplies were cached on an island; we had nothing to repair canoes with, and were cut off from the store in Gjoa Haven until the sea froze in December. But Inuttiaq would never in the world have actually refused the request of the *qallunaat*, the white men. Such a refusal would have violated Inuit rules of courteous, obliging behaviour. It would also have caused—it did cause—Inuit to fear reprisals. So, when the Americans left, next day—for quite other reasons (fear that new ice would freeze their float plane into the inlet)—the Inuit assumed they were angry with us—even though, in the end, they had gotten the canoe. The result was that not only my family, but everybody in the Inuit camp, ostracized me.

I suppose this reaction seems a bit extreme to you, and more than a bit puzzling. I hope it will become clearer, later, when I tell you more about how Inuit emotions are shaped. At the time this all happened, I didn’t understand any better than you do what was going on.

I didn’t understand that I was ostracized, either. It was so subtly done that although I vaguely felt something was wrong, I blamed my malaise on having been too long “in the bush”: fatigue; longing for my own world. Then I read the letters that two camp members had written to the missionaries in Gjoa Haven. The authors had given the letters to me to keep until the annual plane should come to pick up any children who might be going out to school. Perhaps they intended I should read the letters, perhaps not. In any case, reading them was a revelation. The letters said that I was unhappy, easily angered, incapable of learning the proper behaviour

that Inuit had tried to teach me, and therefore ought not to be there, studying “real people,” that is, Inuit. It was that experience, above all, that started me on the road to studying Inuit emotions. It attuned me to noticing the sorts of emotional behaviour that upset Inuit, and the values they placed on proper emotional behaviour. It honed my observational abilities to an acute perception of the previously invisible, inaudible signals that something was wrong in a relationship. Most particularly, of course, I learned to see the subtle signs that I was ostracized. Finally, the experience motivated me to analyze the ways in which Inuit managed emotional deviance. The study that became my dissertation.

Nowadays, studying emotions is all the rage (so to speak). There’s even an international, multidisciplinary organization for research on emotion. But at the time *Never in Anger* was published, anthropologists (with the fortunate exception of my thesis supervisor) did not consider emotions an appropriate subject for investigation. The notion that a story about emotions—worse yet, a personal story—should be a Ph.D thesis was so unheard-of that I had to write it behind closed doors, and my supervisor—Cora DuBois, a granddame of anthropology and a founder of the field of psychological anthropology—had to “pack the committee,” as she put it. While anthropologists recognized that emotions existed; that rules for their expression varied from society to society; that expressive style might profoundly “flavour” a society (Benedict, 1934) or a period of life (Mead, 1928); and that failure to infuse themselves with the right flavour might make individuals extremely uncomfortable, nevertheless, the analytic lense tended to be focussed on the situation, the behaviour, the belief that caused a given emotion, not on the emotion itself. And nobody considered the possibility that emotions might be constructed and construed differently in different worlds. Fear, resentment, trust, love might be felt more or less frequently, and with greater or lesser intensity in different societies, but fear was fear, resentment was resentment, trust was trust, love was love.

Even anthropologists who studied “personality” or “national character” made very few mentions of “emotion.” Instead, they dealt in terms like “vigour,” “aggressiveness,” “diligence”—in other words, behavioural dispositions—which, again, were to be understood as *we* understand them. The word “emotion” occurs on only four pages of Margaret Mead’s classic book, *Growing Up in New Guinea* (1930). Mead does talk about the effects of “terror,” “shyness” and “hostility” in the lives of individual Samoan girls, but she disposes of the Samoans’ “unusual attitude toward the expression of emotion” in a

paragraph (1928: 71); while Ruth Benedict's fuller discussion of "the circle of human feelings" in Japan deals only with sensual "pleasures" and the sacrifice of these in the service of higher goals (1946: 177-195).

I'm not putting that work on personality down; it was sometimes marvellously insightful. But, by and large, emotions—and the individuals who felt them—slipped through the cracks. Of course, I'm giving you a grossly oversimplified view in the short time that I have. I do want to mention two exciting exceptions to the picture I'm drawing. One was an article written by Hildred Geertz in 1959, in which she outlined Javanese emotion vocabulary; the role played by certain key emotions in Javanese social life; and the way children learn to feel and express those emotions. The other work was Kenneth Read's *High Valley*, written in 1965—an autobiographical account of Read's two years in the New Guinea Highlands. Read doesn't discuss emotion *concepts*, but he does portray vividly the emotional texture of the lives of several tribespeople. Both article and book influenced me profoundly.

I think one reason why emotions got short shrift for a long time was that they were considered *infra dig*, not a worthy subject of study. A common view in our society, even nowadays, is that Emotions (capital E) belong to the devalued region below the neck; are more the property of women than men; and are antithetical to Reason (capital R)—which is a very high-status concept indeed. (I have it on good authority that this point of view has a long history in the Western world. My historian friend Stuart Pierson [personal communication] tells me that both Macchiavelli and Richelieu considered emotions *wholly* destructive of proper social order. There was nothing good to be said about them at all; they were just for women.)

So, when we say of someone that (usually *she*) is an "emotional" person, or that (s)he "acts emotionally," we are not paying a compliment. But to use the word "emotion" in this way is like using the word "fire" only in connection with forest fires; it relegates emotion to the world of nature-out-of-control, focusses attention on its enormous destructive potential, and blinds us to its equally immense usefulness in social contexts. An alternative view, which psychological anthropologists are coming to—often guided by the ideas of the non-Western peoples they study—is that emotion cannot be separated from cognition, and one should rather speak of emotion-cognition. In this view—which I agree with—one cannot experience emotion without labelling (cognizing) it. Without the cognitive component, emotion is experienced merely as amorphous, physical dis-

turbance. On the other hand, cognition—understanding of any sort, not to mention interaction—would be impossible without emotion. Emotionless voices are most characteristic of electronic synthesizers and of people suffering from severe emotional disturbances. (When I tried to flatten my voice in this paragraph to demonstrate the problem, I found I couldn't do it.)

But I'm getting ahead of myself. In 1963 my attention, too, was initially focussed on emotion because of its destructive qualities. I wanted to know what had gone wrong in my relationships with my Inuit family, so that I could restore those relationships. The Inuit themselves conceptualized the problem in emotional terms: "She's not happy here"; "she gets angry easily." So, following their lead and my own predispositions, I too concluded that the difficulty was a matter of emotion. It seemed to me, initially, that the problem arose from the contrast between Inuit rules of expression and mine. Then, trying to explain why my improper expressive behaviour was so extremely upsetting to Inuit, I began to notice the social meanings and the values they placed on emotions like happiness and anger—meanings and values that were different from mine. For them, a happy person was a good person, a safe person; anger was mindless, childish; also dangerous: an angry person might kill. For Inuit, social order did not derive merely from following rules of expression, it depended on feeling the culturally appropriate emotions. As they saw it, emotions motivated behaviour.

I think they were right. Emotions do motivate behaviour—for us, as well as for them. Of course, "motives" come in many varieties: economic, political, religious; they derive from beliefs and values . . . , from all the usual stuff of anthropology and other social sciences; but as a mover—often a powerfully experienced mover—behind our every action there is wanting and not wanting, fearing, loving, liking, curiosity and repulsion, and so on. I am using *our* emotional palette here; but don't imagine, even temporarily, that I'm suggesting that *our* emotions are universal. I'll explain what I mean in a moment. Here, the point I want to make is that people have emotional reasons for believing and valuing, for being religious or not, for being (in Canada) New Democrats or Progressive Conservatives.

But what were the emotions people talked about in the Inuit camps where I lived? Once my antennae had been pointed in the direction of emotion, I was quickly struck by how differently Inuktitut (the Inuit language) categorized emotions, as compared with English. I was delighted with my discovery, of course, since I really wanted to find that cultural differences went beyond the level of social rules for

expression, and beyond the mere labelling of one emotion as “good” and another as “bad.” I wanted to find that culture penetrated the depths of the psyche.

And what did I find? Let me give you two examples of the differences between emotion terms in Inuktitut and in English.

(1) In the Inuktitut that I learned—first, the Western dialect of Utkuhikhalik, then the eastern dialect of Qipisa—there were two quite distinct words for what English-speakers call “love”; and they represented two very different concepts.³ *Nalik-* or *nallik-* referred to a nurturant, protective attachment, in some contexts rather similar to our notion of Biblical love, as in “love thy neighbour as thyself.” There was “pity” in it, a feeling of concern for the unfortunate and helpless; a wish to help. *Nallik-* was considered a mature emotion. Its presence defined a good person and a good parent. But people also said it was undesirable, uncomfortable, to feel *nallik-*; and they said they didn’t like to be *nallik-*ed, either. Strange ways to talk about the highest value? We’ll come back to this.

Unga-, on the other hand, was a needy, dependent attachment, which was considered immature: “The way a small child feels toward its mother; it cries when mother is not there.” *Unga-* too was an uncomfortable feeling; a feeling to be outgrown.

There was no specific “love” word that referred to an egalitarian, reciprocal attachment and enjoyment of another’s company. If one wanted to talk about such a relationship one used a term *piu+gi>*- (or *pitsau+gi-*, depending on dialect), which can be translated as: “consider [another person] good”; or “be in a good relationship with [a person]”; or: to “like [someone or something].”⁴

(2) My second example of an Inuit emotion concept that differs from our own is *ilira-*. Whereas in *nallik-* and *unga-*, Inuit separate emotions that we conceptually combine, in *ilira-* they combine emotions that we separate. I’ve compiled its meanings both from my observations and from those of Hugh Brody, reported in his book, *The People’s Land* (1975).⁵ *Ilira-* refers to:

- “nervous awe that comes from being in a position of irreversible disadvantage . . . in which one cannot modify or control the actions of another” (Brody, 1975: 158-9);
- a feeling of being dominated;
- a feeling of dependence (Brody, 1975: 159);
- a fear of being scolded;
- a fear of refusing and being refused;
- a fear of the actions of an unpredictable, ununderstandable person (Brody, 1975: 159);
- intense respect;
- shame.

Like *unga-* and *nallik-*, *ilira-* is a very uncomfortable feeling. But without it, Inuit said, people can’t be socialized. It is the mark of a person who is sensitive to sanction.

Conceptual differences like these between Inuktitut and English convinced me that the repertoire of emotions is not the same the world over. There is no universal “set” of concepts.

But what difference does the particular shape of a concept make to people living their lives?

Three years after the end of that first difficult field trip, I went back to live with the same family; and this time, I focussed on emotion concepts. Whenever I heard an emotion word I wrote it down, and then I listened to the ways in which people used that word in living their everyday lives. I also asked for definitions. And suddenly, here was a treasure-trove of information about Inuit social relationships and Inuit ways of thinking and feeling about those relationships. It was also a treasure-trove of ideas about how to think about the meanings of emotions.

I discovered—it seems obvious *now*—that thought—at least about social and psychological matters—is never abstract; meaning and the understanding of meaning are always based on real life experience in real life situations. Inuit, defining emotion-related words for me, made this very clear. “What does ‘*katsungngaittuq*’ mean?” I asked my Inuit father one day in 1968. He said, “That’s the way you were when Pala [his father-in-law] didn’t want to take you fishing.” The incident he referred to had happened in 1964, four years earlier, while I was ostracized. Not yet realizing that I was ostracized, I had asked if I could go with Pala, and Pala had experienced my direct request as insistent pressure, which put him in the awkward position of having to refuse me directly. Later (we’re back in 1968 now), when my two-year-old sister Rosi was whining that oats (from my all-too-rapidly dwindling supply) should be put in her tea, my father, still mindful that I wanted to understand the word *katsungngaittuq*, called my attention to the incident and said, “Look, she’s *katsungngaittuq*.” So, the meaning of *katsungngaittuq* for me is embedded in the contexts in which I heard the word used—contexts in which I was sometimes actor, sometimes observer, usually both. And I have come to think—along with increasing numbers of other scholars—that the meanings of emotions are always inextricably embedded in—not only coloured, but profoundly shaped by—the contexts in which they are used: the purposes of their users, and the associations and memories of their hearers. This is why investigation of what emotion concepts mean to their users can tell one so much about those users: their social arrangements and per-

sonal relationships, their values, their ideas about human nature and proper behaviour, and in general, the emotional texture of life: what it feels like to be an Inuk (or another kind of person), living in a particular time and place, with particular associates.

And I suspect that Inuit sometimes used my investigations for their own purposes: to teach me proper social behaviour. When Inuttiaq, my father, told me that *katsungngaittuq* was the way I had been perceived when Pala didn't want to take me fishing, he reminded me—deliberately or not—of the inappropriateness of my behaviour in an earlier incarnation. And when he labelled *katsungngaittuq* the behaviour of two-year-old Rosi, he created for me an instructive association between my behaviour and that of a small child—an association which both taught me something about the meaning of the word and influenced my future behaviour. Inuttiaq, deliberately or not, was constructing for me the concept of *katsungngaittuq* in both linguistic and social or moral terms, and these aspects of the concept were inseparable and indistinguishable. This point brings me to a question that currently fascinates and absorbs me: What are the experiences that help Inuit children to understand emotions?

I had been living with Inuit on and off for several years, and thinking about them for more than 10 years before I came upon an important part of the answer to that question; and the answer led me, ultimately, to quite a new view of Inuit culture and society: what makes it tick; what it *feels* like to live in that society.⁶

The answer to how Inuit children learn about emotions—and also almost everything else worth knowing about social life—lies in a sort of play that adults engage in, most often with small children as protagonists and objects. I use the word “play” in the senses of both game and drama, but most importantly the activity is play in that adult players perceive themselves to be “pretend-talking”; they don't intend to follow up with “serious” action, statements or questions that sound very serious indeed. When I describe these interactions, my audiences often label them “teasing”, because the children don't know that what is happening to them is playful. But I don't like to call it “teasing” because of the nasty meanings that that word often has. People tend to have ready-made culture-bound notions of what motivates teasing: It's mean; it's cruel; it's intended to humiliate; or (the most positive among negative views) it's to toughen children against the hard knocks of life.

Inuit play is much more complicated and interesting than this. A central idea of Inuit education is to “cause thought.” Adults stimulate children to think by presenting them with emotionally powerful problems, which the

children can't ignore. One way of doing this is to ask a question that has the potential for being dangerous to the child being questioned, and to dramatize the consequences of various answers. In this way, adults create, or raise to consciousness, issues that the child will perceive to be of great consequence for his or her life. “Why don't you kill your baby brother?” “Why don't you die so I can have your nice new shirt?” “Your mother's going to die—look, she's cut her finger—do you want to come live with *me*?”

Questions like these are asked all the time in interactions between adults and all small children. The adult questioners quite consistently see themselves, and are perceived by other adults, to be good-humoured, benign, and playful. In fact, the dramas could not exist at all if they were not enacted in “play” mode, because their aggressiveness violates the rules that govern “serious” behaviour. But the children who are played with don't know this. For the adult, the interaction is part idle pastime, part serious teaching device, part test of how much understanding the child has developed; and more often than appears to *our* ears, it is a celebration of a child's existence and dearness. It is also frequently a means by which adults can vicariously enact their own interpersonal dramas, expressing, and perhaps relieving, their own concerns and problems. And all these motives exist in continuously shifting combinations. Uninitiated children, who don't understand that adults don't mean exactly what they say, may be severely challenged by the questions, especially as the interrogations are often focussed on transitions, even crises, that a child may be going through: weaning; adoption (very common in Inuit society); or perhaps the birth of a new sibling. When children have learned to disentangle the playful from the serious in a particular drama, and when they can no longer be drawn into the trap that the adult is setting, adults will stop playing that game with them.

An important feature of these interrogations and dramas is that they rarely give children answers. They hint, they nudge, they load the dice—and if a child gets too upset they comfort: “I was only joking; have some tea”; or “Do you really imagine he doesn't *nallik*- you?” But they push children hard, and they don't make solutions easy. Indeed, usually there are no permanent solutions; salvation lies in being continually alert to multifaceted and shifting situations. One of my favourite interrogations illustrates this:

A three-year-old girl, whom I call Chubby Maata (Briggs, 1998), was sitting on my lap, playing with my nose and the pens in my pocket. Her mother asked her: “Do you consider Yiini good?” Maata raised her brows:

“Yes.” Mother: “You do?! Do you know that she’s a qal-lunaaq? Do you know that qallunaat scold? Do you know that she’s going to go very far away to her country? Do you want to go with her?” Chubby Maata began to look at me solemnly and searchingly. Mother: “Do you consider Yiini good?” Maata wrinkled her nose: “No.” Mother in a tone of surprise: “You don’t?! Do you imagine she doesn’t *nallik*- you? Who gives you tea? Who gives you bannock and jam? . . . Do you consider her good?” Maata: “No.” Her mother laughed.⁷

There are clues that children can use in their efforts to figure out what adults mean and where the dangers hide, but they aren’t easy to read. One clue, I think, lies in resonance among what I call “key phrases” and recurrent themes. Children hear the same questions and suggestions over and over again: “Want to come live with me?” “Whose is it?” “Take it home.” “Who’s your daddy?” “Your daddy’s no good; do you consider him good?” “Who *do* you consider good?” Tracking three-year-old Chubby Maata over a period of six months, I can see her attending to those key phrases or questions, and altering her behaviour as she learns more about their implications. One day, for example, Maata was visiting me with her mother. Maata—who was very fond of tea with milk—made some comment about the milk on my food platform. Liila said, “Take it home.” Chubby Maata smiled self-consciously and ducked her head. Liila repeated several times, “Take it home.” Maata as consistently refused. “Why not?” “Because I’m scared.” Two hours later, Chubby Maata visited me with her doting father, who poured her a cup of tea and asked her tenderly: “Are you going to put milk in it?” Maata smiled self-consciously. He asked her again, and again she smiled—and this time she added: “I don’t own it.”⁸

Another kind of clue to adult meaning comes from tones of voice. Small children are often spoken to in a repertoire of emotionally exaggerated voices, which I have labelled: fear; disgust; saccharine persuasion; tenderness, and so on. But watch out! Voices sometimes convey messages very different from the verbal content that goes with them; or both voice and words may be opposite to what is really intended. A criticism can be delivered in a tender voice (“What a darling little *kat-sungngaittuq* child she is”)—remember that word?—; and a loving message can be said in a disgusted voice with disgusted words (“Aaaq! You stink! Do you wrongly imagine you’re good?”). Indeed, an Inuit child’s job is not an easy one.

Nevertheless, little by little, as dangerous key phrases and puzzling voices resonate with one another, children build up webs of association, and meanings cumulate.

What does all this play have to do with understanding and learning about emotions? Well, the dramas and interrogations out of which the webs of association are woven often point out the consequences of feeling various emotions. And all the issues that they dramatize are emotionally disturbing to the child who is doing the weaving. I will trace out one of the webs in Chubby Maata’s life. It will illustrate the complexities of emotional meaning that can grow out of the contexts in which an emotion concept is learned. More than that, it will show you the emotional texture of one Inuit three-year-old’s everyday life.

Many of the dramas enacted with Chubby Maata have to do with attachment. In some cases, the adult players give her the Inuktitut words that the drama is about; in other cases they do not; she has to draw her own conclusions. In one drama she was invited to come and live with a neighbour, a young woman with whom Chubby Maata had a relaxed, friendly, playful relationship. The young woman’s invitation was issued (repeatedly) in the saccharine persuasive tone. She pretended that the decision was entirely up to Maata; but when Maata consistently refused to come, her friend became more forceful and pretended to steal Maata’s puppy so that Maata would follow her pet. Finally, Maata hesitated before refusing to come, then said aloud: “Ih! I almost agreed!” Immediately, the neighbour swooped on Maata, picked her up and turned toward the door, saying: “You agree!” Maata cried out, struggled out of her captor’s arms and retreated to the lap of her uncle. From this position she initiated a game of her own: a race she ran with herself, to and from the door, saying each time she set off: “One, two, talee, GO!”—re-enacting the neighbour’s threatening game, I think, but securely controlling her own fate, this time.

But was she secure? Suddenly, the uncle slapped Maata’s bottom, and pretended that it was I who had attacked her. When Maata looked at me suspiciously, her mother asked her whether she considered me good. Maata said she did not, whereupon all the adults present began to inquire systematically into her likes and dislikes: “Do you consider *me* good?” “What about *me*?” Maata rejected almost everybody, including the neighbour girl and even her mother; but when her uncle asked if she considered him good, she said yes. After all, he was her “protector” against the neighbour—until he turned traitor; but Maata was not sure that he did play her false. Immediately, he said in a tender tone: “Just me alone, yes?” This time, his perfidy was clear to Maata. Exclusive attachment is disapproved of, except—within limits—in the case of spouses; and Maata sensed this.

She rushed off to the door in a frenzied race with herself: “One, two, talee, GO!” (Let me out of here! says her frenzy). There is much more, but I can’t go in to that now.⁹

Clearly, this drama tells Maata that attachment (unlabelled in the drama) has its dangers. Both being attracted to, and being attractive to, neighbours could cost her her home. So she says she doesn’t like her erstwhile friend; she doesn’t consider her good. Her mother is watching Maata’s every move to see whether she feels appropriately *unga-* (dependently attached) to her and to home. Both mother and neighbour certainly approve Maata’s decision to stay home—though they don’t say so. On the other hand, they are amused at Maata’s rejection of everybody, because rejection (like exclusive attachment) is outlawed in Inuit society; it is a sign that one does not feel *nallik-*; one is not a good person.

Maata is on a tightrope. Let me spell it out for you, drawing on other dramas in addition to this one. She has to know where she belongs and must feel strongly bound to that home, to the point where she unquestioningly rejects others’ invitations, which often masquerade in *nallik-* clothing. Safety lies in *unga-*, because, if she doesn’t feel *unga-*, she could be stolen or adopted. But at the same time, feeling *unga-* is a little childish. To unmask false *nallik-* Maata has to be watchful and suspicious of other people’s intentions toward her. But she has to be sharp enough to recognize when false *nallik-* is playful and harmless, so she can react with equanimity and humour. She should never let mistrust and *unga-* cause her to reject others’ real *nallik-* feelings for her; and she should *nallik-* others in turn, so that people will not resent her standoffishness or neglect, and retaliate by attacking or abandoning her. But (back full circle) she should not *nallik-* or allow herself to be *nallik-*ed too much, or too exclusively, either, because then she could be stolen or adopted.

Are you hopelessly confused? Think of how confused Chubby Maata must be. I am showing you only one small (and very oversimplified) fragment of the tapestry that is Maata’s world as she experiences it. Notice that the weaving of that tapestry generates very mixed—and mutually entangled—attitudes toward all forms of attachment: the highly valued *nallik-*; the devalued *unga-*; and the reciprocal *piugi-*, “considering good”; while at the same time, it makes all three indispensable to Maata’s social and emotional life. Maata has to tread a treacherous path, in order to behave appropriately and keep herself out of trouble.

It is these experiences with the plots of everyday life that teach Maata what *nallik-*, *unga-*, *piugi-*—and also

ilira- feel like, and thus, what they mean. As we watch her learning, I think we can understand what people meant when they told me that these feelings made them uncomfortable.

Perhaps it is less clear why such tangled and ambivalent emotions—not to mention doubts about people’s intentions—are useful to Chubby Maata and to her fellows. I can’t give you a full picture, but let me remind you of just a few characteristics of Inuit hunting society. (1) Hunters had to be both autonomous in action and strongly motivated to come home and feed their families. Families had to help each other, too, because resources were limited and luck never fell evenly. (2) People were often lost, through accident or death or just moving away. (3) There were no law-enforcement institutions; and forceful settlement of conflict was impossibly dangerous. People had to settle disputes by avoiding them. And one way to avoid them was to anticipate others’ needs and fill them before they were expressed.

How do ambivalent emotions, suspicions, and fears of imaginary dangers contribute to such a social situation? In Inuit society, strong ties of both *unga-* and *nallik-* motivated extraordinary efforts to provide for one’s family, even in case of famine. *Nallik-* ensured that responsibility was more widely exercised, too. At the same time, discomfort with attachment and fear of the imagined power of others—that is, *ilira-*—energized autonomous decision-making and action. People strongly wanted not to be interfered with; not to be controlled or told what to do, as someone who *nallik-*ed or *unga-*ed you might try to do. Ambivalence about attachment also helped people to defend against loss. Often, they simply withdrew, emotionally, when they feared catastrophe—sometimes to the point of rejecting a child who unexpectedly came home, cured, from the hospital: the child was already effectively dead. Finally, *ilira-*,—fear of a power that was hardly ever exercised “seriously,” but that (thanks to the dramas) was blown up to nightmare proportions in imagination—motivated people to be alert to the slightest sign of others’ displeasure, and to quietly, autonomously avert trouble. If I had had this sort of sensitivity when I first went to live with Inuit, they might not have had to ostracize me.

Tracing out Chubby Maata’s entanglements has led me to the conclusion that Inuit social life is experienced by Inuit as a mosaic of emotionally charged issues—dilemmas, which are never permanently resolved. Some issues may be latent at any point in time; but they can be evoked again in a moment by any small sign of trouble, or merely by a question that resonates with the questions one was asked in childhood—just as the question “Are you angry,

Yiini?”, asked by a 13-year-old in Baffin Island in 1979, made my stomach knot up in memory of ostracism in 1964 a thousand miles away, before that 13-year-old was born.

Now I think you can understand better why Inuttiaq was so upset when I told the *qallunaat* he didn't want to lend his canoe. Inuttiaq's instruction to me not to lend the canoe, like the young neighbour's threat to Chubby Maata, was a wish-fulfilling exercise of power in imagination. The neighbour, just married, was really looking forward to having a daughter of her own, and might have liked to adopt Maata, who was a charming child. Inuttiaq really disliked and feared the American fishermen and would have liked to refuse them his canoe. Chubby Maata and I both mistook fantasy for reality. Maata's interpretation frightened only herself; mine frightened Inuttiaq. At the same time, when I spoke to the *qallunaat* in his presence, I deprived him of his legitimate stance of authority, the stance of an autonomous decision maker. I also deprived him of his goodness, which would have been manifested in *nallik*-behaviour; and I ran a risk of conflict with the dangerous *qallunaat*. I made him feel *ilira*-.

I'll leave you to recover now. But before I stop, I want to remind you that I have not been talking only about Inuit society and culture. I have been talking about the constructive power of emotions in social life, and about social and psychological processes of meaning construction that are certainly widespread—if not, in one variant or another, universal. I did not find in the Arctic the utterly unique human nature that I originally, naïvely, hoped to find. But I did find a fascinating variation on human themes; and now I am trying to find out what's happening to the emotional plots of Inuit life in modern Arctic settlements, where everything is in flux. And all this work raises questions (not for me to answer) about how *we* culturally construct, socialize and utilize the palette of emotions in our everyday lives. We too create tangled webs for our children (and their parents) to unravel—but do we know what they are? We shouldn't leave an understanding of emotions to advertisers and the odd politician.

Thank you. And thanks also to Stuart Pierson and Adrian Tanner for their helpful comments and advice on this paper. They are very *nallik*-ing, and I consider them good.

Notes

- 1 This paper was originally delivered in a distinguished public lecture series at Memorial University of Newfoundland, March 1995.
- 2 This incident is described at length in Chapter 6 of *Never in Anger* (1970).

- 3 Since Inuktitut is a polysynthetic language, *nallik*- and *unga*- are, properly speaking, not words but wordbases. They cannot stand alone. These concepts and their social roles are analyzed more fully in Briggs 1995a and b.
- 4 In the North of the 1990s, I have heard young English-speaking Inuit translate “in love” as *nallik*-; and two slightly older women told me that reciprocal attachment between spouses could be called *unga*-. In the West Greenlandic dialect, on the other hand, there is a third word for this kind of love: *asa*- (Inge Lynge, personal communication).
- 5 I have discussed the components of *ilira*- more fully in Briggs 1976. Further discussions of the composition and uses of *ilira*- feelings, and many examples of their occurrence in a three-year-old are found in *Inuit Morality Play* (1998: 136-137, 148-149 and *passim*).
- 6 These questions are addressed, explicitly and implicitly, in *Inuit Morality Play* (1998).
- 7 Elements of this interrogation are found also in other dramas, some of which are recorded in Briggs 1998. See, for example, pages 97-98, 167 and 169.
- 8 These incidents in their entirety can be found in Briggs 1998: 211-213. Variations on the same themes occur in an episode recorded on pages 167-168.
- 9 The drama described in the preceding two paragraphs is the subject of Chapter 4 of Briggs 1998. See pages 91-115.

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