

# The persistence of conflict avoidance among the King Island Inupiat

## La persistance de l'évitement du conflit chez les Inupiat de King Island

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### Article abstract

During the summers of 2005 and 2006, a group of Ugiuvangmiut (King Island Inupiat) and western scientists participated in a project entitled "Documenting the Cultural Geography, Biogeography, and Traditional Ecological Knowledge of King Island, Alaska." The intent was to bring Ugiuvangmiut to King Island in order to document and map place names, as well as archaeological and subsistence sites. Throughout fieldwork, conflicts occurred between scientists, between community members, and between scientists and community members. As the principal investigator, I confronted one conflict in 2005, but my actions exacerbated long-standing tensions within the community and I was later advised by two community members that I should not have confronted the conflict. When conflict occurred again in 2006, instead of confronting the conflict, I chose to take a break from the project for several days. The result was that the overt conflict within the community lessened. Based upon these experiences and other examples, I conclude that conflict avoidance still persists among the Ugiuvangmiut. In addition, I "write against culture" (to borrow Abu-Lughod's phrase) to explain how my mixed ethnic background and the backgrounds of two community members resulted in actions that run counter to conflict avoidance, showing that there are "multiple, shifting, and competing" cultural values at play. I end with suggestions for scientists conducting fieldwork in the North.

# The persistence of conflict avoidance among the King Island Inupiat

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Deanna Paniataaq Kingston\*

**Résumé:** La persistance de l'évitement du conflit chez les Inupiat de King Island

Durant les étés 2005 et 2006, un groupe d'Ugiuvangmiut (Inupiat de l'île King) et de chercheurs occidentaux participèrent à un projet de recherche intitulé «Documenter la géographie culturelle, la biogéographie et les savoirs écologiques traditionnels de l'île King, Alaska». L'objectif consistait à ramener des Ugiuvangmiut sur l'île King pour recueillir des toponymes et identifier leur location, ainsi que documenter les sites archéologiques et ceux liés aux activités de subsistance. Au cours du travail de terrain, des conflits éclatèrent entre les chercheurs, entre les membres de la communauté, ainsi qu'entre les chercheurs et les membres de la communauté. En tant que directrice du projet, je choisis de faire face à ces conflits en 2005, mais mes actions ne firent qu'exacerber des tensions présentes depuis longtemps dans la communauté, et deux aînés me dirent par la suite que je n'aurais pas dû prendre part au conflit. Quand un conflit se reproduisit en 2006, plutôt que de l'affronter, je choisis de me retirer du projet pour quelques jours, ce qui eut pour résultat d'apaiser les tensions dans la communauté. Sur la base de ces expériences et d'autres, je conclus que l'évitement du conflit perdure chez les Ugiuvangmiut. De surcroît, j'écris «contre culture» (pour reprendre l'expression d'Abu-Lughod) pour expliquer de quelle manière mon héritage ethnique métis et l'héritage ethnique de deux membres de la communauté produisirent des réactions contraires à l'évitement du conflit, montrant ainsi qu'entrent en jeu des valeurs culturelles «multiples, polysémiques et antagonistes». Je termine l'article avec des suggestions pour les chercheurs faisant de la recherche dans le Nord.

**Abstract:** The persistence of conflict avoidance among the King Island Inupiat

During the summers of 2005 and 2006, a group of Ugiuvangmiut (King Island Inupiat) and western scientists participated in a project entitled "Documenting the Cultural Geography, Biogeography, and Traditional Ecological Knowledge of King Island, Alaska." The intent was to bring Ugiuvangmiut to King Island in order to document and map place names, as well as archaeological and subsistence sites. Throughout fieldwork, conflicts occurred between

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scientists, between community members, and between scientists and community members. As the principal investigator, I confronted one conflict in 2005, but my actions exacerbated long-standing tensions within the community and I was later advised by two community members that I should not have confronted the conflict. When conflict occurred again in 2006, instead of confronting the conflict, I chose to take a break from the project for several days. The result was that the overt conflict within the community lessened. Based upon these experiences and other examples, I conclude that conflict avoidance still persists among the Ugiuvangmiut. In addition, I “write against culture” (to borrow Abu-Lughod’s phrase) to explain how my mixed ethnic background and the backgrounds of two community members resulted in actions that run counter to conflict avoidance, showing that there are “multiple, shifting, and competing” cultural values at play. I end with suggestions for scientists conducting fieldwork in the North.

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## Introduction

In June 2006, a group of King Island Inupiat—Ugiuvangmiut is the term they use to refer to themselves—and scientists were staying at the seasonal camp at Woolley Lagoon on the Seward Peninsula. We were there participating in a project entitled “Documenting the Cultural Geography, Biogeography, and Traditional Ecological Knowledge of King Island, Alaska”. Woolley Lagoon is owned by the King Island Native Corporation<sup>1</sup> and, for this project, it was where we transported Ugiuvangmiut by helicopter from the mainland to King Island (Ugiuvak). We used camp as a staging area in 2005 and found that it had worked quite well as it is about half the distance to Ugiuvak as Nome, saving us both time and money on the helicopter.

However, due to interpersonal conflicts I experienced with a particular individual, I chose not to stay in camp. When an elder woman in her late 70s, Singaq<sup>2</sup>, asked me why I was not present, I explained what had occurred with this individual and her reply was, “That’s what you do to bad people.” I understood her comment to mean that my decision to avoid direct contact with this individual was an appropriate (for the Ugiuvangmiut) cultural response, especially since I am also Ugiuvangmiut<sup>3</sup>. I did not,

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<sup>1</sup> The King Island Native Corporation is an Alaska Native corporation established under the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act.

<sup>2</sup> *Singaq* is the Inupiaq name for an elder woman in the King Island Inupiaq (Ugiuvangmiut) community. I will be using Inupiaq names to protect community members’ identities from non-Ugiuvangmiut when discussing conflict avoidance specifically. However, community members themselves will know who I am referring to, even if there are several individuals with the same name in the community. I used this same convention in my dissertation and I found that this is appropriate.

<sup>3</sup> I was born in the mid-1960s in Portland, Oregon. My mother, Olga Muktoyuk Kingston, was educated at the Chemawa Indian School in Salem, Oregon, and then moved to Portland, where she met my father, who is a non-King Islander. I consider Oregon my home, although I go to Alaska as much as possible. Therefore, I refer to myself as an “Oregonian of Ugiuvangmiut descent” in order to move away from

however, ask her what she meant when she said “bad people.” But because I had named a specific individual and explained the nature of the conflict, I assume that she was referring to this individual and her actions when she said “bad people.” Upon further reflection, I believe that my assumption was correct for the following reasons: First, in my experience working with and interviewing Ugiuvangmiut, I have witnessed conflict avoidance that is well-reported in the ethnographic literature of the North; members of the Ugiuvangmiut community rarely, if ever, confront people with whom they have conflicts. In addition, they usually never say anything more negative than “he (or she) is funny” when I asked questions about how certain difficult people are viewed within the community. Second, another community member, Aisana, who is of my generation, later told me how the same individual behaved inappropriately with Singaq. And, finally, Singaq herself did not elaborate further about either this individual or her actions, thereby avoiding conflict herself. In fact, Singaq never said anything negative about this individual to me and it is only through another community member (near my age) that I learned what happened. Thus, by not giving me details, but by commenting “That’s what you do [*i.e.* stay away] to bad people,” I concluded that my decision to avoid conflict was appropriate.

This article discusses how the Ugiuvangmiut still prefer to avoid direct conflict in their interpersonal relationships. I have written it for two reasons: 1) To show that although some aspects of Ugiuvangmiut “traditional” culture are in decline (*e.g.*, language use), other aspects, such as how one behaves toward other community members, still persists. In this case, I am referring to the persistence of conflict avoidance in the community; and 2) To influence greater understanding between scientists and Indigenous peoples of the North, especially since climate change in the Arctic is bringing more western scientists into contact with northern populations in order to do research.

Below, in order to show this persistence of conflict avoidance, I first discuss the background to the project, followed by a discussion of how I responded to conflicts that occurred while in the field in 2005 and 2006. However, in order to protect those parties involved in the conflicts and also to prevent exacerbation of those conflicts, I will not give details about the conflicts nor will I say who was involved in the conflict, other than myself. Instead, I will focus on how I responded to those conflicts, how the community responded to my actions, and what that reveals about Inupiat values with regard to how conflict is handled within the community. By focusing on my actions, I expose my inexperience as a supervisor as well as how my own socialisation influenced my behaviour. In this way, I follow Jean Briggs’s (1970) classic example in which she openly discusses how her sometimes painful experiences with the Inuit taught her their cultural values. In much the same way, I learned, through my sometimes painful management of this project, that the Ugiuvangmiut still strive to avoid conflict in their interpersonal relations. The fact that I am writing about conflict is counter to what the community prefers, but I feel that my experiences throughout

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using the label “Native anthropologist” for myself since that term carries with it certain assumptions and expectations (Abu-Lughod 1991; Narayan 1993).

fieldwork on this project can help intercultural cooperation between Indigenous peoples in the Arctic and western scientists that conduct research there.

Next in the article, I will contextualise this discussion within previous works on Inupiat and greater Inuit interpersonal relations, followed by some observations of how my position as an insider-outsider to the Ugiuvangmiut community—a “Native” anthropologist (Narayan 1993)—may have influenced how community members then taught me about conflict avoidance. I end with some concluding thoughts and suggestions for other researchers.

## **The King Island project**

The “Documenting the Cultural Geography, Biogeography, and Traditional Ecological Knowledge of King Island, Alaska” project had its genesis in a comment made to me by a female elder, Aakauraq, in winter 1997. I was in Nome conducting dissertation fieldwork on the King Island Wolf Dance (Kingston 1999) and while interviewing Aakauraq, she pointed to a picture of King Island on her wall and gave me its Ugiuvangmiut name and then said, “Almost every rock, every place has a name on King Island. We need to get elders to the island as soon as possible so we can write down those names.” Eventually, after enlisting the help of a variety of social and biological scientists and community members, I wrote a proposal to the National Science Foundation, who funded the project in 2003. I served as the main Principal Investigator, assisted by Jesse Ford and Matt Ganley.

Our intention was to bring as many as 50-70 community members and about 10 scientists (an anthropologist, anthropology graduate students, a linguist, several archaeologists, a videographer, a general ecologist, and an ornithologist) to King Island for two weeks each summer for two summers in order to document place names and subsistence, as well as archaeological sites associated with those places. Eventually, because of logistics constraints and safety reasons, we limited the number to about 30-35 individuals (both community members and scientists) in 2005 and between 20-25 in 2006.

As one can imagine, bringing a multicultural and multidisciplinary group of people together to work on a research project was a situation ripe for interpersonal differences. Indeed, during preliminary planning meetings in fall 2004 and winter 2005 with Ugiuvangmiut, community members called for the scientists to undergo training where some basic Inupiat cultural behaviours and values would be introduced<sup>4</sup>. For various

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<sup>4</sup> At the time, I thought that the suggestion was aimed solely at the other scientists involved in the research, but now I realise that it was aimed at me, too. I have conducted research in my community since 1995, but in 1999, when trying to communicate with the tribal council about this and other research, a council member informed me that the community felt that I did not share the results of my research with them. However, the tribal council had recently adopted the “King Island Intellectual and Cultural Property Rights Policy” and I was told that if I abided by this policy in the future, they would support my research.

reasons, this did not occur, but the fact that community members asked for it shows that interpersonal difficulties were anticipated. In order to alleviate a few of these difficulties, I sought to make clear that scientists needed to consult with and treat community members with respect. All scientists, for instance, were given a copy of the “King Island Intellectual and Cultural Property Rights Policy” that the Native American Rights Fund developed for the King Island Native Community and King Island Native Corporation. In that policy, it clearly states that no research about King Islanders or King Island, or even occurring on the island itself, could proceed without the consent of the King Island IRA<sup>5</sup> council and the King Island Native Corporation. In addition, it stated that all research on King Island culture should involve the King Island community, from planning, through implementation, analysis, and presentation/publication of results. This policy has been adhered to in this project, such that we claim that it is a community-driven (rather than a scientifically-driven) project. The point is that we tried to make very clear to the scientists that Ugiuvangmiut called the shots, so to speak. They held the power and authority to say yes or no to certain aspects of the project. I hoped that this might alleviate some miscommunications, especially in terms of scientists trying to dictate research activities to community members.

While this policy may have alleviated potential conflicts between scientists and community members, I did have differences with the other scientists. For instance, I adopted a hands-off management style and told the other scientists what kinds of information I was interested in, but I did not tell them how to do their work or when to do it. I told them that I was relying on their expertise to figure out how to get at the information and asked them to talk to community members directly. In other words, I set up a research situation that brought the two groups together and left it up to them to figure out how to do the work. I wanted the scientists to develop their own relationships, independent of me, with community members. While in the field and afterwards, I heard that the other scientists felt that I should have been more direct in managing the project, while community members seemed to appreciate the fact that I was not “bossy.” This is just one example of the type of conflict that occurred throughout both field seasons (in July 2005 and June 2006).

Since I do not want to exacerbate any conflicts, I will try to describe the nature of the conflicts without divulging any details. For instance, the conflicts that occurred between community members were based, in part, upon long-standing factional divisions within the community (see Bogojavlensky 1969). Conflicts that I had with community members tended to revolve around cultural misunderstandings because I grew up outside the community and therefore act more “white” (*e.g.*, giving direct orders, not sharing, talking about “bad people,” etc.). Conflicts between scientists sometimes revolved around how to do their distinct disciplinary research under the rubric of cultural anthropological questions and issues. In addition, they involved my inexperience as a supervisor as well as my hands-off management style, leaving people unsure as to who was responsible for what aspect of the project, whether it be logistics

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<sup>5</sup> IRA is the acronym for ‘Indian Reorganization Act,’ hence a tribal council.

or research methods. Conflicts between community members and scientists were based more on cultural misunderstandings, similar to the conflicts I had with community members. For this article, I focus on how I responded to those conflicts, how community members responded to my actions, and how that subsequently affected past, current, and on-going interactions within the community.

### **Fieldwork in 2005 and 2006**

During the first field season in July 2005, I was a novice field supervisor. Although I had carried out fieldwork in the past, most of my research involved interviewing people about various aspects of King Island culture and history. I was always uncomfortable conducting this research because I felt, to some extent, that I was “spying on relatives.” Because I felt I was “spying,” I never wrote fieldnotes of my observations of community interactions. Instead, I used the observations to learn how to behave when I am around other Ugiuvangmiut. However, I did feel comfortable interviewing people, as this was an overt (*i.e.* not “spying”) behaviour on my part. Most of my publications are based on these one-on-one interviews (*e.g.*, Kingston 1996; 1999; 2000; 2001a; 2001b; 2003). Then, in 2005, I was in charge of that major research project as the main principal investigator (PI). I not only supervised scientists and several graduate students and asked them to conduct research along certain lines, but I was also the person who called community meetings and asked the community for advice. In addition, I acted as a liaison between scientists and community members (although I urged scientists to create their own relationships with community members so that I did not always have to be the “middle man”), and between those actively involved in the project (both scientists and community members) and the logistics staff. I had little experience being a supervisor of such a large group, as my prior experience was supervising students. It was a trial by fire for me, because not only did I make mistakes in how I handled various situations (like forgetting to communicate something from one party to the other or asking someone else to take over meetings for me), but I was also negotiating differences in cultural values.

For instance, in 2005, I decided to go to King Island on one of the last helicopter flights because I had had the good fortune to go on a reconnaissance flight to King Island in 2004. I felt it was more important that other community members (many who had either not been on the island before or for which it had been 20, 30, 40, or 50 years since they were there) go to the island before I went again. This decision was also based in part on the fact that community leaders thought that elders who grew up on the island should go to the island first before other community members (including me), especially since logistics limited the total number of people we could send. In addition, due to uncertainties of the weather, we realised that we might be forced to send even smaller numbers of people. Unfortunately, because of weather, the last helicopter flights were cancelled and I did not make it to the island. I later found out, through an individual who was familiar with the project and who was in communication with both me and the other scientists, that the other scientists did not agree with my choice. She urged me prior to the 2006 season to be sure that I went to the island “because you are the PI and you needed to be there.”

Today, I still believe I made the right decision to wait (especially in terms of my relationship with the community), although it is certainly counter to what other scientists would expect. I do think this resulted in more community support for the project because they saw that I sacrificed my spot so that another community member could go. This is an example of the different cultural values at play in the project: in western society, as the main PI, I should have been on the first flight to the island. But I was also sensitive to the fact that many community members (at least 70) had not been to the island in years and since I was fortunate to go in 2004 and since seats were limited—no more than 40 would be allowed to go—I felt I should give my seat to those individuals. I also felt that giving up my seat was a way to share the resources of the project with other members of the community. Finally, it also had to do, in part, with the fact that the work I needed to do (collect traditional stories and other personal histories and narratives) could be done just as easily at camp as on the island. In other words, the elders and some of the other scientists (the ornithologist and the archaeologists) needed to physically be on the island, whereas I felt that I did not.

There was one major conflict that I felt needed my direct intervention (as the main PI) because both community members and scientists were getting more and more agitated about the situation. I find it hard to characterise the situation in even general terms because it has the potential to open up the conflict within the community. I feel that I can say that it revolved around logistics planning for safety on King Island and the tension between allowing access to as many Ugiuvangmiut as possible (*i.e.* sharing the project's resources) versus the safety liability for the National Science Foundation logistics contractor, Veco Polar Resources, who needed to limit the numbers of people on the island in case they needed to be evacuated or having enough food and water on the island in case of bad weather. The situation resulted in a heated discussion between me and some other individuals, which subsequently caused a major schism within the community, with some community members siding with me and Veco staff, and some with the other party. While this schism revealed some underlying and long-standing tensions within the community, the fact that I directly confronted this particular conflict caused the Nome community to polarise around the project, so much so that an individual in the community, near my age and knowledgeable about community politics, asked me several months later, "What the HELL happened?" This person later advised me that if I happened to see these other individuals, that I say "hi" and then go about my business and this person said the other parties agreed to do the same with me. Another community member, also my age, told me that among Ugiuvangmiut, "if someone starts yelling at you, you are supposed to say nothing and just take it. Don't say anything back." These comments occurred 8-9 months after the initial incident, showing just how much discord the conflict (and my response to it) caused.

These comments, then, were in my mind prior to the start of the 2006 field season. That spring (late May/early June), there was a very late ice-breakup and snowmelt in Nome. The land-fast ice in Nome did not leave until several days after our arrival, after the first week of June. This caused delays in opening up cabins for our use, because the roads were not cleared by the state Department of Transportation, subsequently limiting access to the cabins at Woolley Lagoon. We then had to figure out alternative



plans, which included holding community planning meetings in Nome, and not at camp as had happened in 2005. Because both scientists and community members had personal business (like paying bills, medical appointments, or other work demands) to attend to in Nome, we did not have the captive audience that we had at camp. So while the planning meetings at camp in 2005 had about 100% attendance, we only had about 60-70% attendance in Nome. Fortunately, a few days after the initial meetings, the road to camp opened up and the team was able to stay there to wait for the helicopter transport. The bad weather also caused a lot of changes in the plans we had made months previously and everyone had different opinions as to what to do. One meeting ended early, before any concrete decisions were made. Some people thought it should go one way and others another, and in trying to discuss how I thought something should occur, I ended up in an argument with another person. Between the argument, the low attendance, the uncertainty in the plans, and the lack of support I felt (particularly from the one individual), I ended up crying for hours that night. Because of the stress, I decided to step away from the project for four days. I said that I would stay involved in the project, but that I would handle issues only through one particular individual as I did not want to talk to anyone else. Among western scientists, it is probably unheard of that the main principal investigator would leave the project in other hands as the research was starting. But at the time, I felt it was the right thing to do as I felt that my anger and frustration would have affected the research more if I stayed involved than if I allowed others to carry on without me. In other words, I felt that my presence would cause the research team to become polarised, which would affect the overall progress of the project.

Later, as the project was winding down in Nome in late June 2006, I saw Singaq, who asked me why I was not at camp. When I said that I had become so frustrated and angry at someone that I decided to step away for a few days, her reply was "That's what you do to bad people." In the fall of 2006, another elder, who could not join our research team in 2006, said that others told her that I had disappeared during the project and she asked why. I gave her the same explanation and she replied, "Oh, okay" and we proceeded to talk about other matters. In other words, my response to the conflict seemed to make sense to her and she chose not to question me further on the matter.

Then, in December 2006, we gathered a group of elders together in Nome to gain clarification on the pronunciation and location of the place names we documented. I was somewhat surprised at how many people participated, including one of the individuals who sided against me in 2005. This individual and I never talked about the previous conflict; we just proceeded as if the previous conflict had never occurred. The point is that the Ugiuvangmiut seemed to accept the fact that I stepped away and that the rift in the community that occurred in 2005-2006 was no longer as pronounced as it had been previously. To sum up, then, when I directly confronted conflict in 2005, conflict increased within the community; in contrast, when I avoided conflict in 2006, the rift in the community had lessened.

## Conflict avoidance among Inuit populations

Cooperation among people was required in order to survive in the Arctic. From the time they are born, Inuit generally, and Inupiat (translated as ‘real people,’ the plural form of Inupiaq, ‘real person’) are encouraged to share and to get along with others. Jean Briggs (1970), for example, explains that the Inuit with whom she lived between 1963-1965 expected people to control the expression of negative emotions. The Inuit apparently expected the same of her, because she found that after she expressed anger at some white fishermen (which was warranted), the Inuit family with whom she lived subtly shunned her for three months (1970: 3). Among the Wainwright Inupiat, a “child’s outward expression of aggressive tendencies toward siblings or other children is discouraged. Mothers [...] can be frequently heard admonishing children not to fight” (Milan 1964: 57). This is true of the Ugiuvangmiut, as exemplified by the one community member who told me not to talk back to someone who was yelling at me. In addition, Milan (1964: 57-58) states that this lack of aggression “seems to be a highly pursued value among adults and is internalized at an early age.” This system of socialising children fosters cooperation and sharing and the avoidance of conflict.

In my own fieldwork, including this project, I have observed that whenever I started to ask or talk about difficult individuals, most people tended to answer my questions with a shrug or a statement like “he [or she] is funny” and then they would change the subject. In other words, people rarely talked negatively about other people, thus avoiding conflict and ensuring cooperation.

### *Song duels and humour*

Within the broader context of the North American Arctic, there were certain cultural practices that allowed Inuit to indirectly point out any interpersonal tensions or aggressions. One way is what scholars refer to as Inuit song duels. The purpose of the song duel was for two participants to fight through songs rather than physical combat. The participants were men (and sometimes women) who composed songs about each other until one person was not able to reply and conceded the victory. Because the song duel was couched in humour, physical violence was avoided (Kingston 2005). This exemplifies the notion that conflict is to be avoided and if there is conflict, humour serves to deflect it.

In Alaska, song duels are still performed today in some Yup’ik and Inupiaq communities. These song duels occur between *illugit*<sup>6</sup> or cross cousins, otherwise known as “joking” or “teasing cousins,” who could live in the same or different communities. Cross cousins are the cousins related to each other through a brother and a sister (*i.e.* mother’s brother’s children or father’s sister’s children) as opposed to parallel cousins, who are the children related to each other through a same sex link (*i.e.*

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<sup>6</sup> Burch spells the plural of *illuq* as *illuriik*. When discussing Burch, I will use his spelling of the word. However, according to the orthography of the Alaska Native Language Center, it would be spelled *illugit*. In my master’s thesis, I used my uncle’s spelling of *illuweet*.

mother's sister's children or father's brother's children). For the most part, interactions between Inuit kin tend to be reserved, but *illuriik* enjoyed what Burch calls a "radical departure from all other Eskimo kin relationships as far as expression was concerned" (Burch 1975: 188). This relationship is characterised by joking and teasing and "by extreme lack of restraint" (Burch 1975: 188). In most all other family relationships, expression of affection was restrained. Burch (1975: 188) elaborates: "[...] *illuriik* could 'talk to each other any old way,'" By this, they meant that joking cousins could tease and insult each other as much as they wanted without evoking ill feelings, sometimes using this relationship as a platform to inform each other about incorrect behaviour. Teasing cousin songs, and song duels more generally, were often composed for this same purpose (Kingston 2005).

In the King Island project, there was one community member (a distant cousin) with whom I developed a teasing relationship of sorts. We are considered to be more like parallel cousins because of our kinship connection, but because he is generally known as a jokester in the community, it was easy to create this teasing relationship. Once, prior to the 2006 fieldwork, this community member wrote an email that I took seriously. His statements made me so angry, I ended up using some very strong language in my reply to him. (Lest readers think my cussing was inappropriate, I would like to pass on the information that this person cusses frequently in everyday conversation. He is also a younger community member who expresses his opinions freely.) The next day, expecting an angry email in return, his reply was, "You go girl [...]. LOL it's about time you let loose. First remember half the time I'm just kidding around about things."

### *Indirect requests*

In Inupiaq/Yup'ik culture, there is also a general value not to tell people what to do or how to do it and usually only elders have this right (Morrow 1992: 65-69). This value emphasises equality between individuals since it implies that one person does not have any power to direct someone else to do something. However, as I mentioned earlier, the scientists expected me, as the main PI, to direct our research activities. But I felt uncomfortable with this expectation at the time because I did not feel it was my place to tell a biologist or an archaeologist how to do their job. It is only now, as I observe my own and my mother's behaviour, that I realise that this value of not telling another what to do was instilled in me as I grew up. For instance, I sometimes get irritated with my mother because she often does not ask for help cooking or doing other household chores, but when she does want something done it's often given as an observation, "The trash needs to be taken out." I find myself telling her, "Just ask me to take out the trash." But then, the other day, I told my father (who does yard work for me), "My lawn needs mowed" instead of just asking him to come over and mow my lawn.

This difference in direct or indirect requests was another source of conflict that I encountered during the project. Even though I tried not to tell people what to do, there

were times when I had to dictate a course of action. For instance, I called meetings of community members and scientists in both 2005 and 2006. In 2005, most of these meetings were well-attended, but not so much in 2006. In retrospect, I think I know why. Part of the reason was because the 2005 meetings were at camp, which was the staging area for helicopter transportation and if people wanted to go to the island, they had to be at camp when we flew. But I think, more importantly, we had a strong contingent of elders with us at camp, including two prominent community leaders: my uncle Aakagak and Alluguq. I would usually consult with them prior to taking any action and I now suspect that they often somehow communicated what I wanted to other community members involved in the project.

In 2006, however, the meetings in Nome were not as well attended or people left early. This was upsetting to me as the main PI. One reason was the late spring break-up which prevented the opening of the Nome-Teller Highway and the opening of cabins at the King Island camp at Woolley Lagoon. In addition, neither of the elder leaders was present in the meetings in 2006. Uncle Aakagak had died in February 2006 and Alluguq elected to travel with one of our archaeologists directly to King Island. Therefore, these elders were not present to encourage participation from the other community members. Not only am I in my 40s and younger than half of the community participants, I am also considered somewhat of an outsider to the community. Although I have never verified with people in the community the reasons for this decreased participation in 2006, I suspect that the elders' involvement is crucial. So, even though I asked individuals to attend meetings since I was the main PI (sufficient for western culture), my request probably did not have as much weight as if an elder had asked.

### ***Flexibility***

The ability to be flexible is another way to avoid conflict. Morrow (1990: 154) states that flexibility and the avoidance of generalisation are part of the Yup'ik philosophical stance. The Yupiit see each situation as unique, calling for an ability to adapt one's behaviour to individual situations. They recognise "certain human limits" in which one never has "knowledge sufficient for blanket statements about others or about the workings of the world" (*ibid.*: 155). I found this to be true among the Ugiuvangmiut, too, especially in 2005 when people patiently waited out the bad weather at camp. In 2005, the weather conditions delayed our departure to the island by about six days and I remember being impressed with how flexible community members remained and how well they accepted these delays. I observed that waiting for the bad weather to pass was harder for the western scientists, who became impatient and irritable when they were not able to get to the island to do their research. The scientists' impatience was due, in part, to the fact that they had other projects to go to after working on this project, an unfortunate fact of academia. However, the Ugiuvangmiut did not have the same time pressure.

In this project, it was necessary to undergo lengthy advanced planning. However, we were also operating in an unpredictable environment and with individuals who accept that unpredictability as part of life. In contrast, in western polar science, as I

have witnessed in my role as a Polar Programs Advisory Committee member at the National Science Foundation (NSF), scientific research requires in-depth planning and scheduling. Because logistics is so expensive, the NSF contracts these activities out to two different companies: Veco Polar Resources in the Arctic and Raytheon Polar Services Company in the Antarctic. Their rationale is that instead of buying the time for 50 cooks (or sleeping bags or satellite phones) for 50 projects, they may only have to hire 10 cooks for 50 projects as each cook will go from project to project over the year. In other words, since NSF is funded by taxpayer money, they try to figure out ways to be cost-efficient. This causes Veco to encourage scientists who conduct research in the Arctic to begin planning their field research projects months in advance so that they can ensure that they have enough personnel, supplies, and equipment. Thus, we began logistics planning with Veco about six months prior to the commencement of fieldwork in both 2005 and 2006.

In 2006, however, with the late break-up, many of our plans went awry. There were many decisions we had to reconsider, so much so that the whole project seemed in disarray. This contributed to my stress level. I had forgotten the lesson that I learned in the 2005 field season and what had been earlier written about Inupiaq and Inuit culture: namely, that Inupiat and Yupiit remain flexible in the face of unpredictable weather and environmental conditions. Having been raised in western culture and now working in academia (in which we plan what classes we teach about 9-15 months ahead of time and where grant proposals are submitted months ahead of the planned research), I relied quite heavily upon the plans we made prior to the 2006 field season. I remained rigid, in other words. When we more or less had to make up new plans on the spot, I was the one who became upset at many in my research team (both community members and scientists) and who was not able to exercise flexibility in the conduct of the project. By getting upset, I became a “bad person.” My lack of flexibility in the making of alternate plans did cause conflict during that season’s fieldwork.

Overall, as evidenced throughout this project, the Ugiuvangmiut still prefer to avoid conflict. They do not speak ill of others; they use joking behaviour to deflect conflict; only elders tend to direct other people’s behaviour; and they remain flexible in the face of uncertainty.

### **“Native anthropologists”**

As Kirin Narayan (1993) noted, the term “Native anthropologist” is problematic since it implies or assumes that the anthropologists are “Native” to their culture and research and write about a culture that they know as insiders. The term also tends to emphasise, as she states, “a dichotomy between outsider/insider or observer/observed” (*ibid.*: 671). Instead, she requests that each anthropologist be viewed “in terms of shifting identifications amid a field of interpenetrating communities and power relations. The loci along which we are aligned with or set apart from those whom we study are multiple and in flux” (*ibid.*). Narayan then gives herself as an example of the

shifting and tangled identities she carries: she is the daughter of a woman who is “the daughter of a Bavarian father and a WASP mother who lived in Taos, New Mexico” and a man who is an “Indian from India” (*ibid.*: 673). She adds that her father’s father was from the Kutch desert region and his mother from the Kathiawari forests. She grew up in Bombay, but as she pointed out, different aspects of her identity were highlighted at different times: for instance in Nasik, her local roots were highlighted by Swamiji (a holy man with whom she studied), but he also challenged her motives because she took “his words on tape ‘to do a business’”; in other words, he also at times classified her with other academics and outsiders (*ibid.*: 674).

I bring this up because there have been times when I have been identified as a “Native anthropologist” and I will also admit to playing up my “Native” identity when it seems that it might give me an advantage. However, other than a few years living in Alaska as a child and a graduate student, or working on the East Coast, I have lived in Oregon for most of my life. This means that I was socialised in western culture and did not learn how to behave as an Ugiuvangmiut: in other words, I am one of those “halfies” referred to by Abu-Lughod (1991). In my case, it is my white ancestry that was emphasised as I grew up (see Narayan 1993: 674, where she states that her Indian ancestry made up more than half of her self-definition). The point is that in all of our cases, the terms “halfie” or “Native” anthropologist describe individuals who have complex identities and which do not necessarily describe us in the same way (*i.e.* what aspects of our heritage are emphasised).

In my role as the PI, I found myself caught between the values and proper behaviour of Ugiuvangmiut “culture” and the western scientists’ “culture”; the ground underneath my feet was constantly shifting (Abu-Lughod 1991:140-141). Do I act as a western academic and give direct orders? Or, do I make more indirect requests and trust that the information that I (and the community) wanted to gather would be recorded? In the case of my response to conflict, when I confronted it in 2005, scientists thought it was appropriate and community members told me that I did not handle it correctly. When I stepped away in 2006, scientists thought my actions inappropriate as the PI and community members accepted it as the right thing to do. Another example was when I gave up my seat on the helicopter to other community members, scientists thought it was inappropriate whereas I never heard anything negative from the community.

In order to make sense of how conflict was handled in this project, I find Abu-Lughod’s (1991) prescription to “write against culture” useful. She writes that the term “culture” emphasises the differences between groups of people and it implies that it is coherent within groups (*ibid.*:146). So, lest I fall into the fallacy of essentialising Ugiuvangmiut culture, I would like to suggest that while conflict avoidance is still a strongly held value among the Ugiuvangmiut, it is not necessarily “coherent” in the sense that all community members adhere to this value all the time. For instance, I would like to point out the action of the two community members who admonished me: both directly told me how I was to behave and how my actions affected the community. Earlier, I mentioned that, in general, Yup’ik/Inupiaq individuals do not tell

other people what to do. How is this seeming incongruent action on the part of these individuals explained? Are they not violating their own cultural norms in giving me direct advice? In order to explain their actions, I will follow Abu-Lughod's (*ibid.*: 147-150) suggestion to "write against culture" by focusing on discourse and practice, connections, and ethnographies of the particular.

According to Abu-Lughod (*ibid.*), the concept of "practice" can help explain the actions of these two community members in that the concept allows for contradictions and misunderstandings: these two individuals did, indeed grow up among other Ugiuvangmiut and so were socialised in correct behaviour. As they are around my age, they know that I did not grow up with them. They have also grown up within the context of the western educational system and are thus familiar with its more direct modes of instruction. Thus, while their direct comments to me might violate Ugiuvangmiut values, they nevertheless chose to give me direct instruction, perhaps in the belief that I needed to know that this was how I was supposed to act as a descendent of the Ugiuvangmiut community. Abu-Lughod's concept of "discourse" also helps to explain their actions, since discourse "allows for the possibility of recognising within a social group the play of multiple, shifting, and competing statements with practical effects" (*ibid.*: 148). In the situation where these two community members gave me direct instruction, there are shifting and competing values at work depending on how they viewed me. If they viewed me as a relative, then my confrontation of conflict was inappropriate, but if they view me as an outsider, then my actions were understandable.

Another way that Abu-Lughod suggests to "write against culture" is to "focus on the various connections and interconnections, historical and contemporary, between a community and the anthropologist working there and writing about it" (*ibid.*: 148). This allows our projects to shift its "gaze to include phenomena of connection, expose the inadequacies of the concept of culture and the elusiveness of the entities designated by the term *cultures*" (*ibid.*: 149; emphasis in original). In this case, the two community members recognised my status as a descendent of the community (one of their relatives) as well as the fact that I grew up outside. By focusing on this connection as fellow Ugiuvangmiut, I gain an understanding of why these individuals told me how I should response to conflict in the future. In addition, I recognise the fact that we are all products of the historical changes that have affected our community; I grew up outside the community, but am acknowledged as a relative and they grew up exposed to both Ugiuvangmiut as well as western values. This should serve to remind us that "cultures" are not static, that they undergo change, and to accept Ugiuvangmiut culture as one of contradictions and intermingling of various values.

Finally, Abu-Lughod (*ibid.*: 149-150) requests that anthropologists write "ethnographies of the particular." By this, she means that anthropologists should not "generalise" about culture since it implies objectivity as well as expertise, and hence a "language of power" associated with "homogeneity, coherence, and timelessness" (*ibid.*: 152). Instead, she argues that we write these ethnographies of the particular in the tradition of fieldwork-based writing, in which anthropologists write about

particular individuals and their changing relationships. As she states, “Individuals are confronted with choices, struggle with others, make conflicting statements, argue about points of view on the same events, undergo ups and downs in various relationships and changes in their circumstances and desires, face new pressures, and fail to predict what will happen to them or those around them” (*ibid.*: 154). By discussing the direct advice these two individuals gave to me, as well as their histories and their connections to me, I highlight the choices they made when faced with me, an individual who is an “insider-outsider.” They made the choice to confront me by advising me that I should not have confronted the conflict in 2005. They risked creating conflict with me. In other words, their actions contradicted their advice to me, showing the ambiguous and shifting position they hold in this particular historical moment as community members who are also products of the western educational system. In the end, they judged that they should give me direct advice and tell me what to do because they realised that I did not yet know how Ugiuvangmiut valued the avoidance of conflict. I believe their actions were appropriate in this particular circumstance. I learned, however painfully, that the Ugiuvangmiut still prefer to avoid conflict.

Beginning in 2004, my colleague, Carol Zane Jolles, began to call me “an Oregonian anthropologist of King Island Inupiaq descent”<sup>7</sup>. By creating this category for me, Jolles avoided the term “Native anthropologist” and all the ambiguities and assumptions that it carries. As a specific, particular description of my status *vis-à-vis* academia as well as the Ugiuvangmiut, it points out that I was not raised among the Ugiuvangmiut and therefore, I should not be seen as an informant in King Island culture. Rather, it points out that 1) I grew up in Oregon, not Alaska; 2) I am an academic trained in anthropology; and 3) I do share kinship ties with Ugiuvangmiut. All help to explain my interest in undertaking this project and, for the purposes of this article, my responses to conflicts that arose during fieldwork.

## Conclusion

The lessons I would like readers to take away from this article are the following. First, to understand that when working with indigenous communities in the North, different values and rules for behaviour are at play and also that these differences are not necessarily absolute, but shift according to the situation. In my case, what is the proper way to address a conflict when working with two very different groups of people? What is my role as the PI? Do I give direct orders? Or not? There is no right or wrong answer since both behaviours are appropriate depending on the situation. In order to know how to behave in a given context, it would behoove scientists to know more about the culture and values of the Indigenous people. I might even argue that while scientists can learn about these cultures through books (as I did), it was not until I actually experienced how conflict was handled within the community that I truly learned the lesson of what it meant. In recent years, I have talked with other Arctic scientists who have noted that when they discuss their work with Indigenous communities, people do not often give them feedback. As Morrow (1992: 66-67)

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<sup>7</sup> I want to thank Carol for coining this term for me. At first, this description of me seemed cumbersome, but now I realise how accurate and how fitting it is.



noted, western resource managers assumed that the Yupiit did not care about resource management issues because they did not respond right away during informational meetings. However, they did not respond because they did not agree with the resource managers' decision-making processes, and so they opted not to say anything in order to avoid conflict. Arctic scientists must not mistake silence as acquiescence or indifference; rather, western scientists may want to keep in mind that perhaps the Indigenous communities do not agree with whatever is being said or suggested.

A second lesson is to remember that we are all complicated individuals with complex and shifting identities. I am this "insider-outsider" person among the Ugiuvangmiut and my position depends on the vantage point that ones takes: to another academic, I'm an insider, but to the community, I'm an outsider, albeit one with kinship ties to the community. Ugiuvangmiut, too, have complex identities, which may cause them to react in a more "traditional" King Island manner in some contexts or in a more "white" manner in others. But how is an outsider scientist to know when this cultural shift in behaviour happens? It is this sort of situation that calls for the creation and maintenance of long-term relationships between western academics and northern communities. It also calls for, following Inuit/Inupiaq/Yup'ik culture, exercising flexibility in our assumptions and expectations of others.

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