

## Democracy and Recognition: Building Research Partnerships

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Recognition is a central demand for peoples, whether minority or majority, who cannot play their part as full citizens. It is at the root of the struggles carried on by many indigenous groups living with the experience of lack of respect or dignity ignored. From 1970 to 2000 the Inuit in Alaska, the Canadian Arctic and Greenland reversed situations they considered unacceptable by approaching the governments overseeing them to defend their right to a dual recognition, both political and territorial, together with linguistic and cultural measures. Without violence and with the spoken word as their sole weapon, Greenland gained a parliament (1979) and Nunavut a legislative assembly (1999), an example that by 2010 will be followed by Arctic Quebec, whose legislative assembly will bear the name *uqarvimarik*, 'the site of speech above all others'. Though we cannot expect these young governments to solve immediately all the problems they face, which are particularly socio-economic ones, it is nonetheless true that the political status they have achieved gives hope by its very existence.

Peaceful resolution of indigenous peoples' demands is one of the main issues in this 21st-century democratic impulse, which we expect will result in the setting up of partnerships combining local with global in full agreement. In this spirit, and strengthened by their ability to manage public affairs locally and regionally, the Inuit have recently taken a further step by expressing a wish to collaborate with the research world; requesting partnerships for thinking and action in the social and human sciences, they wish to have their expertise recognized in fields such as adapting to change or relationship with the environment. In Canada there have recently been established partnerships between researchers and communities, supported by national funding bodies, which are an expression of the wish to cooperate not only with the Inuit but also with all the First Nations. The more general question arises of the meaning to be given to research that attempts to link scientific objectives with the outlook expressed by actors on the ground. These new directions do throw up

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constraints and tensions between local demand – the Inuit are very keen to see short-term results – and the requirements of theoretical analysis. They also raise questions about the relevance of research topics selected, the long-term involvement of communities and the participation of young generations in the work.

These new partnerships between researchers from outside and local communities tend to go beyond the paradigm that has dominated since the early 1990s, which involves integrating into scientific research knowledge generically labelled ‘traditional ecological knowledge’ (or TEK). However interesting this approach may be, it has certain limits: indigenous knowledge is recognized for the validity of the information it contains, but it is neglected as a matrix for organizing the information collected. Hence the indigenous people’s frustration when confronted with the research results.

Insofar as the issue of recognition has motivated the creation of these new partnerships one of the great questions concerns work in the field, the site par excellence of speech in action. The new configurations imply that certain epistemological and methodological choices should be re-discussed, which would allow ways of articulating alterity to be rethought. It is a question of redefining the researcher/informant relationship in order to identify the most appropriate forms of interaction. How are we to hear the multiplicity of indigenous voices and recognize subjects and their contingency; how are we to avoid inappropriate generalizations, a criticism indigenous people often level at researchers; how are we to approach generational disparity, an issue at the heart of the current concerns of many Inuit since, in accordance with recognized values, only the Elders are seen as legitimate spokespeople for the culture? What place should be given to the voices of younger people, especially as they do not hesitate to express their unease when faced with researchers who collect knowledge and accumulate it in places very far geographically from the place they live in?

As regards carrying out research and returning its results to the communities studied, advances have been made to ensure the best exchange on the ground. The 2002 International Conference of Inuit Studies (Anchorage, Alaska) and the one in 2004 (Calgary, Canada) bear witness in their respective titles – *Indigenous Voices* and *Bringing Knowledge Home* – to an approach that is more attentive to communities’ demands. But this work cannot be limited simply to practices in the field. To be fully realized it must also concern itself with what happens at conferences and discussions, that is, the spaces that have hitherto been reserved more often than not for the scientific community alone. Up to now not much has been done in this area. Indigenous people and researchers have been used to putting up simply with joint presence, given the difficulties involved in arranging for a satisfactory common language. Because it is in fact issues of quality of utterance, ethics and the meaning to be given to research results that present themselves. Appeals have been made to researchers to acquire the means to meet this expectation.

Building new research partnerships must take into account the experience of those among indigenous people who are already involved in constituting their own cultural heritage and, without external collaboration, are carrying out large-scale operations, thus offering the scientific community unprecedented materials. In parallel a large number of Inuit have started up a dialogue with social science

researchers, and in particular ethnologists and anthropologists, in reaction to research plans drawn up solely with the scientific angle in mind. So since 1999 we have seen books appearing that are presented in dialogue form (young Inuit talking to their elders) in a well-made bilingual edition (Inuktitut-English). Designed by Nunavut Arctic College (in Iqaluit, Baffin Island) they deal with topics seen as central by the main interested parties: social memory, oral transmission, customary law, interpenetration of shamanism and Christianity, invisible entities, dreams, relations with a changing environment, physical and psychic wellbeing. Apart from the paper version around ten books are currently online at: <http://www.traditional-knowledge.ca>.

Recent research partnerships offer considerable advantages: they give a fresh impulse to ethnographic work, they revalorize the spoken word and orally transmitted knowledge, they promote the emergence of a discourse on topics wrongly seen as exhausted or else abandoned. Which does not mean, however, that the merits of classic fieldwork are being underestimated and that the need to put the data collected into theoretical form is being denied.

So orality – that is, the various aspects of indigenous knowledge passed on orally – is coming to the fore as a relevant meta-theme, both for researchers and for many indigenous people who would like speech to gradually regain the legitimacy it has lost since there has been continuous contact with the western world. The interest in orality brings into prominence what is never publicly acknowledged, that is, the omnipresence of the spoken word in contemporary indigenous public and private life, and this is despite the strong presence of the written word. A regrettable practice lays down that all processes, especially in administrative life, should depend on the written word and that it should be associated with a guarantee of truth. While the Inuit recognize that the written word has undeniable merits, they intend to preserve certain extremely precise and diversified knowledge that has been communicated to them orally, in the belief that they are preserving its relevance in a changed world.

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Translated from the French by Jean Burrell