Introduction to Section VI: Art & Culture

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An astonishing aspect of the now blossoming interest in Arctic research is how much public attention the environmental changes associated with global warming are receiving but how little emphasis is placed on how those physical processes are influencing cultural change in the region. While Arctic politicians and mass media outlets comment on how rapidly the North is being altered physically, it is important for scholars to help people understand how much culture is evolving in the Arctic for both Indigenous and introduced (i.e., settler) residents. Toward that end, this section's contributions use art, most produced by Arctic dwellers themselves, and analysis of traditional behaviors to examine the region's cultural diversity and richness.

As Arctic social science and humanities researchers, all of us should strive to illustrate the region's tremendous cultural diversity, for both Indigenous and settler residents living there. That is not so easy given that both scholarly and popular writings over the past hundred years have portrayed Arctic peoples as monolithic cultures, covering large swaths of the Circumpolar region, remaining static and unchanging over time. Yet without living informants, the variation in cultural behaviors such as language for prehistoric populations cannot be determined as can living Arctic peoples today. For example, the Sámi inhabiting their homeland from Norway to Russia historically possessed ten different dialects that were mutually unintelligible, while the Inuit people stretching from Greenland to Alaska contains twelve such dialects. Today, however, Arctic scholars are challenging a theoretical framework that has lasted a century: the Culture Area Concept (Wissler 1927). While Culture Area helped early ethnologists organize an incredible number of seemingly unrelated Indigenous peoples into meaningful groupings to help understand them, the concept often put together very disparate groups. While perhaps this was a good start in the early days of ethnology, modern scholarly work in the Arctic should address cultural diversity both between pan-Arctic peoples (e.g., Eskimo-Aleut language speakers) and within specific Arctic peoples (e.g., Komi).

Popular media has misrepresented Arctic peoples as uniform cultures for a long time, which may be even more damaging to the public's perception of the region than scholarly writing because it reaches many more readers. At the beginning of the 20th century, the Arctic remained a foreboding place, considered so desolate and insurmountable that Canada's official defense policy did not believe its northern regions were subject to invasion by a foreign country from over the pole. Only one century ago the second Ziegler Polar Expedition failed, although all but one member was

rescued. That result was very different than the many previous attempts to reach the North Pole by boat, dog sled, or hot air balloon where few, if any, journey members survived. Still, the adventure of conquering the pole resulted in popular writings and paintings that brought the remote region home to the southern public.

The Admiral Peary expedition to the North Pole in 1909 captured the world's attention as publications including newspapers and *National Geographic* printed everything they could about the journey and the Arctic. The National Geographic Society, through its flagship magazine and other publications, created a stereotype of "Eskimo" culture as uniform and static by reprinting for nearly seventy years photographs of "Polar Eskimos" (*Inughuit*) accompanying Peary. That stereotype permeated primary and secondary schools through the Society's widely used *Geographic School Bulletin* (1919 – 1975). As teachers portrayed Inuit in their classes using the National Geographic Society representations, well into the 21st century American college students uniformly depicted specific elements of the Polar Inuit such as igloos and dog sleds when asked to draw an "Eskimo" scene (Wheelersburg 2016). Later, the National Geographic Society attempted to exhibit the diversity of Arctic indigenous cultures in the 20th century through articles and cartography, especially with its *Peoples of the Arctic* issue and map insert (Judge, 1983).

Over a century after the Peary Expedition, the opening of the Arctic through such communication corridors as the Transpolar Route will allow mass tourism into the region. One aspect of the open Arctic that may shock visitors is the variety of peoples who live there, from Indigenous to settler, rural to urban, immigrant to founder (e.g., Muslim asylum seekers and Icelanders). Yet Arctic peoples, especially Indigenous communities, want to respond to environmental change in a dynamic fashion (as they have always done) and not be thought of as merely static entities. An example would be tourists who visit Sápmi, desiring to see people riding in reindeer sleighs (*akkja*) and wearing traditional clothing (*gákti*) rather than using helicopters and plastic lassos and wearing Fjällräven coats to herd reindeer (Figures 1 and 2).

Today, Arctic residents' dual nature as traditional and modern creates a tension in how southern dwellers view the region's communities. As stated in 1998,

> We all want to keep developing in the coming century. For the people in the Arctic … the need for growing modernization has become a need that cannot be stopped or reversed. We cannot move backwards and stop using our modern technology, even though there are some romantic movements around the world that would like us to do so. [Such movements] want us to be living museums to please their bad conscience over their mistreatment of nature in their own parts of the world.
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> -Jonathan Motzfeldt (1998)

The quote above from former Greenlandic Prime Minister Motzfeldt at the Polartech Conference in Nuuk, Greenland, shows the tension between Indigenous peoples protecting their traditional way of life while at the same time wanting outsiders to regard them as modern peoples, fully capable of governing themselves, as in autonomous regions. The first step toward understanding Arctic residents, Indigenous and settler, is to record where these various groups live and the territories which they control through mapping that includes documenting both their traditional and modern behaviors.

Using various visual art genres, Timo Jokela and his co-authors illustrate the way that humans interact with the environment in the Circumpolar region. A similar perspective is shared by Katri Konttinen. Unlike photographs and paintings from a century ago, which portrayed the desolate

and empty character of the High Arctic, today's modern artists show the vibrant and interactive nature of landscape consisting of snow/ice, wildlife, and humans. These images bring the Arctic to life and accurately reflect the interactions between humans and their environment.

Dzhuliiana Semenova takes Arctic representation further to facilitate artistic expression of the region by Indigenous people themselves. For the vast majority of past studies of the Arctic, ethnographers and other scientists and explorers from the south created the portrayals of the Arctic with their bias as visitors. Portrayals produced by the residents themselves allow more precise cultural images of the Arctic from the perspective of life-long residents.

Krister Stoor presents an intriguing aspect of Sámi traditional behavior when he describes the genre of a capella *yoik* as a form of time travel, which allows performers to experience the time when the songs were created. By performing the traditional music, descendants and others can visit their ancestors' earlier periods to understand their shared past. Since *yoik* can never be taken out of its original context, contemporary Sámi learn about how their elders related to other people, animals, and places in their northern homes through its performance.

Tatiana Zhigaltsova's article uses an innovative approach to understand Arctic urban residents' feelings about where they live by analyzing schoolchildren's drawings. Seeking to interpret how young people view their cities on both sides of the Norwegian-Russian Border on the Kola Peninsula, the children's artwork presents a picture of how attached people are to their homes, and how that attachment (or lack thereof) relates to their tendency to migrate out of the region or to remain where they were born.

Karolina Sikora and Maria Fedina submit a piece that refines our understanding of a specific Russian Arctic people, the Izvatas, whom many consider part of the Komi. The authors maintain that the traditional festival of the *Lud* serves to assert the local identity of the Izvatas Indigenous community as distinct from the Komi, further supported by having their own dialect, homeland, economy, and other cultural traits. Understanding such distinctiveness is critical in establishing indigenous rights when governments combine various communities into larger categories like the Small Peoples of the North.

Importantly, today's Arctic has undergone a diaspora during the past century. Approximately a third of Greenlandic Inuit live in Denmark proper, while less than 10% of Sámi in Norway live in Sápmi and herd reindeer. Yet Arctic peoples tie themselves together by sharing traditional resources (e.g., sea mammal or reindeer meat) along family lines. They also participate in rituals and festivals to reinforce their common cultural bonds, allowing members to reestablish their kin and cultural ties to remain part of their communities; especially for those living away from the homeland in Stockholm or Ottawa. Engaging in traditional behaviors including art, music, and festivals, provides common experiences to reinforce the differences between those participating from within the community and those of other related groups who do not belong.

The editors hope that these contributions continue the process of presenting the diversity of today's Arctic cultures, bringing the dynamic and changing Arctic to life for the readers.

Figure 1. Tourist activity at Jokkmokk Sámi Market 1986 with Sámi in traditional clothing (*gákti*) driving sleds (*akkja*) in a reindeer caravan (Photo: Susan Wheelersburg).

Figure 2. Sámi herder wearing a baseball cap, rain jacket, and plastic lasso during the fall 1994 herd separation in Västerbotten Province, Sweden (Photo: Robert Wheelersburg).

References

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