

Friday, October 6, 2006

Inuit filmmaker brings his people's history to light Kunuk documents conversion of last great shaman

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CREDIT: The Canadian Press

Zacharias Kunuk's film *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen* gives a glimpse into the pressuring of Christianity on the Canadian Inuit.

Though cinema has only been around for the last century or so, Inuit filmmaker Zacharias Kunuk takes a much longer view within the context of an unrecorded history.

"We came in one lifetime from the Stone Age to digital technology. We Inuit adapt. We're good at adapting. Filmmaking is just another way; it's just like hunting, like soapstone carving."

Likewise, the success of *Atanarjuat The Fast Runner* -- which won the Camera d'Or at Cannes and numerous other international and Canadian film awards -- brought ancient Inuit life to a global audience. For Igloolik Isuma, the team behind that film, it meant bigger budgets and greater resources, but their mission to continue to create and share stories about Inuit people in the Inuit language hasn't changed.

"The only difference was we had a lot more money with Telefilm requirements," writer/director Kunuk says on the phone from Igloolik, Nunavut.

"We had a bigger crew, but the style of filming is still the same. The only problem with the bigger crew was it was distracting for the actors."

Looking for their next project, they turned to the records of a Danish anthropologist, Knud Rasmussen, who traveled from the Canadian Arctic to Greenland to Alaska. Using portions of his journals that dealt with Igloolik, they pieced together the story for *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen*, which centres around the life of Avva, the last Inuit shaman, and his family.

"I heard about it after *Atanarjuat*," says Kunuk.

"We wanted to do something about shamanism and Christianity. The journals were there, and so it was a good choice."

Unlike *Atanarjuat*, which is based on an ancient legend, the story of Knud Rasmussen is historical, which had its advantages for the filmmakers.

"The journals come with photographs, we can see their faces and how they dressed. That was a lot easier for the costume department to make these clothes. And we could see the faces to closely match who should play the characters."

Aside from studying the journals, Kunuk and co-writer/director/cinematographer Norman

Cohn consulted Inuit elders for the other side of the story.

"What we were researching was what was not written. Mainly what we were interested in was what happened here. We knew that there was a Christian movement happening, so we had to sit down with elders for two weeks talking about it, describing what happened to the people, what their characters are so our actors could get to know what they were like."

It's the introduction of Christianity that is the pivotal moment in the story, and for Kunuk, it was the beginning of the end of traditional ways.

"For our Inuit audience and for our young people, we're showing that we survived 4,000 years under shamanism: Be kind to animals, use only what you need. We had everything -- food, clothes. You had to be a good hunter to be rich. Christianity came, all that was put aside. Growing up, the minister was telling us don't do drum dances, don't tell legends because they're the work of the devil. It's brainwashing. It happened in New Zealand, Australia, Africa. It probably all happened the same.

"I wanted to put it down on record. For 4,000 years of our history, it is only the last 85 years that Christianity came. It doesn't balance. We traded 100 taboos -- laws of nature -- for Ten Commandments, which now I don't have any trust for after looking at where they came from. Love thy neighbour? They're bombing the hell out of each other! But we had to throw away all these rules of the land, taboos we just dumped so we could go to heaven."

Kunuk is humble about his role in Inuit culture ("I'm just a filmmaker"), but he does see a connection with telling these stories with a revival of traditional ways.

"Shamanism was here, and it's going to be here, that's what my elders tell me. After *Atanarjuat*, the elders started to talk about shamanism more. With this film, because their families are in this community, people learned about their namesakes. We live by namesakes. When I was born, I was given five names, but the government couldn't pronounce them so we were given tags and family names."

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