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Inuit Cree Reconciliation: A documentary built on oral history

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Film about historical enmity between Cree and Inuit in Quebec brings to life a violent chapter of northern history scarcely known elsewhere

The war in northern Quebec began before there was a Quebec, before anyone but Cree and Inuit lived there, and it ended more than two centuries ago. But as filmmakers Zacharias Kunuk and Neil Diamond discovered, the long conflict between the two native peoples still echoes through their present-day relations.

Diamond is a Cree from Waskaganish, Que., near James Bay, best known for the 2009 film *Reel Injun.* Kunuk is an Inuk from Kapuivik on Baffin Island, and the maker of the 2001 feature *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner.* Two years ago, they travelled with *Atanarjuat* actor Natar Ungalaaq and a film crew to the eastern shore of Hudson Bay, to find out more about the skirmishes and killing that went on between their peoples for at least a century, ending in the late 1700s.

One of their first stops was a divided community at the mouth of the Great Whale River, where Inuit and Cree settlements have separate governments, schools and services. The town has two names, Kuujjuaraapik (Inuktitut) and Whapmagoostui (Cree) and even visibly different roads – gravel on the Cree side, asphalt on the Inuit. There is enough residual enmity that people in the area convened in 2011 for a ceremony initiated by Cree trapper Ron Sheshamush to try to heal the rift once and for all.

Inuit Cree Reconciliation, the 45-minute film Kunuk and Diamond made about the war and its modern-day aftermath, spans at least three centuries and three languages (Cree, Inuktitut and English). It brings to life a chapter of northern history that's scarcely known elsewhere, in the stunningly beautiful places where it occurred. The film also gives pride of place to the way First Nations retain their history, through stories handed down by elders. This is a real indigenous documentary, if that word even applies to a project so grounded in oral culture.

The filmmakers did not interview academic historians. They travelled by boat for four days to the site of the ceremony near the Nastapoka river, camping and filming and looking for stories that still live among the people. They show elders relaying their tales of ambush and murder while in the midst of daily activities, cutting up a seal or cleaning fish on the beach. The juxtaposition of tale and situation carries a charge that no talking head could match. These people are telling what their ancestors did or how they suffered, more or less in the places where it happened, while carrying on the same subsistence activities that were interrupted by violence so long ago.

One elder tells of a slaughter so extensive that the Inuit called the place where the rotting bodies were left Annarnituq – Bloated Island. It's visible in the distance as a boy runs toward it through the wild grass. Another elder's story provides an image of a peaceful encounter, of armed Cree hunters coming ashore at an Inuit camp and being mollified by a gift of sealskin rope. That scene opens the film, and is later re-enacted at the reconciliation ceremony.

Cree and Inuit have very different cultures and languages, so it may not be surprising that there was conflict when their hunting territories crossed. But even when their communities faced a common challenge two centuries later,

during the James Bay Project negotiations, they bargained with the Quebec government separately and without much fellowship. "Inuit and Cree would just turn their backs on each other," remembers one elder in the film, with more sorrow than bitterness. In some ways the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement that was signed in 1975 cemented the estrangement, by formalizing separate governance for Cree and Inuit, and different relations with the powers in Ottawa and Quebec City.

Other events outside the film's narrative may have brought the two sides closer together. In 1990, while lobbying against a proposed hydro-electric project on the Nastapoka, Cree and Inuit from Whapmagoostui and Kuujjuaraapik paddled from Ottawa to Earth Day celebrations in New York in a boat that was half canoe and half kayak. Last January, when the Idle No More movement was stirring across the country, seven young Cree from Whapmagoostui began a 1,600-kilometre walk to Ottawa that grew into a symbol of common cause among all First Nations. The incident of the sealskin rope at the start of *Inuit Cree Reconciliation* carries a similar resonance.

By the end of the reconciliation ceremony, after Cree and Inuit leaders have embraced and peace pipes have been handed round, there's a sense that a step has been taken in dispelling old animosities. But the film's stress on the power of oral history also reminds us that cultures that keep the past alive through human chains of storytelling are necessarily slow to forget.

Inuit Cree Reconciliation is streaming in HD at isuma.tv/en/InuitCreeReconciliation/movie