

# ‘Will you marry me?’ was not the question ... Part 1

Ann Hanson explores the Inuit tradition of arranged marriages

This is the first in a three-part series by Ann Hanson retelling the Inuit arranged marriage tradition, which was still practised in some parts of the North until the late 1970s. See next week’s edition for part 2.



Ann Hanson

As a little girl, I remember one of my aunts calling and screaming for help as she was being dragged out of our home.

No one helped. We weren’t allowed to. I was frightened, because we seldom saw adults cry — only when someone died.

No one had died, but there was a big struggle as my aunt was being dragged out against her will. She struggled and kicked — her arms trying to hold on to anything in her path — and cried all the way while being dragged out. While she did that, our meagre cups, tea kettles, Primus stove, and drying racks were being strewn around with bangs, clangs, thuds and many other noises not normally heard at night.

This was not a normal night. My aunt was being dragged out by her new husband. This was the way to start a new life in a traditional arranged marriage.

Traditional marriage was arranged by parents and grandparents-to-be even before the baby was born, according to some interviews I’ve conducted over the years while working for the Canadian Broadcasting Corp., doing Inuktitut programming. Leah Nutaraq, who was a constant contributor on Inuit traditions, once talked about this subject and said when a woman was pregnant, she would say, “If this is a boy, he will marry the girl my girlfriend had a few months ago.”

This often became a reality and sometimes not. The other method was when the young man was able to hunt, build a shelter, when he became knowledgeable on weather conditions, ice conditions, when he could feed his family, share his harvest with the village, run a dog team, it meant he was ready for a wife.

That was the time to look for a girl who was skilled in skin- or pelt-preparations, making life-saving garments, preparing foods and food preservations. Looks didn’t matter. When a girl was found in the same village or some other village, the young man’s mother or father wrote a letter to the girl’s parents asking them if they would agree to have their daughter marry their son.

Then there was a big life-changing discussion with the parents, the grandparents ... but not the boy. The boy didn’t have any say in this matter. It was all up to the parents and grandparents. The same with the girl. She had no say whatsoever in the matter. It was kept in secret until the boy came to get the girl. This was further confirmed by elder Aimo Mapaluk during our interview here in Iqaluit. Not all traditional marriages were done this way.



Aimo Mapaluk, an elder living in Iqaluit, says he is familiar with the Inuit tradition of arranged marriages. His own father and stepmother were married in the manner many Inuit were, according to an old tradition. (Photo by Jeff Pelletier)

There were a few exceptions. One was Mapaluk’s. During our interview, Mapaluk said he knows the arranged marriage tradition very well, both from hearing old stories from the distant past and during his growing-up years with his stepmother Attuat and father Sappa. Prior to having their daughters marry a complete stranger or some casual acquaintance, the mother got busy making a new tent — sealskins in the past, and canvas in recent years — gathering her clothing and kamiiik and packing them for a trip. This was done all in secret without telling the daughter.

Mapaluk, an elder living in Iqaluit, said he knows of young girls being tied up with ropes when they struggled too much. The girl’s arms and legs were tied up, she was carried to the sled, and then tied onto the sled. This was equally frightening for the young man. Mapaluk explained that the young man was obeying his parents’ wishes out of respect and fear. This is called *ilirasuk* in Inuktitut, a deep respect that compels young Inuit to do what they are told — *ilirasuk* for his parents and her parents. With time and patience, the young couple got used to each other and were calmer. They got to be friends and eventually love each other deeply for life. Mapaluk remembered that some couples separated because they could not get along for several reasons.

With a soft voice, Mapaluk ruefully expressed that “some men were abusive, and when the leader in the village knew about this, he separated the couple.” Mapaluk personally experienced this with his stepmother Attuat. One of her husbands had been abusive, before Attuat married Aimo’s father, Sappa. Attuat solved her abusive relationship with her own strong traits. She got tired of being abused and thought to herself, “I am tired of being abused. I must make a plan.” The next time her husband was beating her, she fought back and pinned him down and told him, “Next time you abuse me, I am going to use the axe and I will not let you free until you agree to have peace with me!” Her husband stopped beating her and made peace with her. Mapaluk fondly remembered his stepmother being intelligent and very strong, physically and mentally. She was also a very good hunter. Attuat went through five husbands during her long life.

Continued in Part 2 of ‘Will you marry me?’ was not the question ... Ann Hanson was the founding editor of Inukshuk newsletter in 1973, which became Nunatsiaq News in 1976. She was the third commissioner of Nunavut. She now lives in Apex.



Aimo Mapaluk, an elder living in Iqaluit, right, talks to Ann Hanson about the Inuit tradition of arranged marriages. (Photo by Jeff Pelletier)

Sometimes the girl got suspicious and nervous. Mapaluk said this was done after all the agreements were completed. Sometimes when the parents could not agree with the girl’s parents, no partnership took place and they had to look for another girl. The girl’s age was not the indicator for being ready for marriage, it was her menstrual cycle. That was when her mother knew she was ready and able to have children. In some rare cases, the girl was given away to her new partner even before she had her first menstrual cycle. This was very scary for the child.



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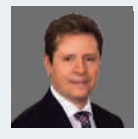
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