

‘Will you marry me?’ was not the question ... Part 3

Inuit arranged-marriage tradition was part obedience, part survival

This is the third article 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.



Ann Meekitjuk Hanson
Special to
Nunatsiaq News

Rev. Michael Gardener —
 For Mike, as many of us
 know him — was just in his
 early 20s and had arrived
 from England when he was
 posted to Kimmirut in
 1955, which was when I
 first met him. I was nine
 years old.

We were amazed by his energy. He ran all the time. Rev. Gardener had to learn Inuktitut fast in order to perform his duties.

And he learned fast.

When I asked him what it was like to perform multiple weddings — where a minister officiates the marriages of more than one couple — he became solemn and answered with care and remembrance: “It was sad and difficult to do at times.”

He said "sad," because the young girls were very scared, quietly crying and shaking.

When I think about this traditional arranged marriage — which is no longer in practice — much to the delight of a lot of our young people, several questions pop up: Why was it done? Who made the rules? Why did all of the North have this tradition? Why no romance? Was there love?

There are more questions than answers. I came up with these answers: The traditional arranged marriages were for survival and to multiply the meagre population in the North.

The man needed warm, life-saving garments to hunt, so he could feed the people and the dogs. The woman needed a man to survive — to eat what her hunter/gatherer husband harvested.

The man needed a woman to populate the village, to have more people so the Inuit could survive and thrive.

The man and woman needed each other to continue traditions, storytelling, history telling, teaching and learning from each other, to create art,



Rev. Mike Gardener stands with his bride Margaret Porter in Iqaluit (then known as Frobisher Bay) on Sept. 10, 1956, with Davidee, who had brought Gardener to Frobisher Bay from Kimmirut, and Davidee's wife Mary and their children. (Photo from the collection of Rev. Mike Gardener)

music in songs, making toys, creating toys to learn from, creating entertainment for the village, and so much more.

Yes, it was scary for both the young man and the young girl. But in the end, according to many Inuit stories, the majority stayed married for many years.

Today we talk among ourselves and tell stories on many things, one of them being this very subject. Some funny memorable ones are: "I was so frightened that I hid outside the village, but got hungry and had to go home."

"I remember my wedding in the outdoors, there were many couples and only one ring in our village. We had to take the ring off of our fingers after saying 'I do' and pass the ring to the next couple right away. Then they had to pass it along to the next couple. The ring was passed on down to the last couple. The wedding was very long."

"If I had killed my husband-to-be while he slept,

I would be out of jail by now!"

The stories go on and on, some very funny and some very sad and scary.

My aunt who was dragged out that dark night such a long time ago is Annie Kimalu Palluq. She turned 92 years old this year.

Her husband who dragged her was Elijah Palluq.

We talked about him recently at my aunt's elders home here in Iqaluit.

He was the kindest, nicest, most generous and honest person.

Elijah Palluq had to act cruel and scary, dragging my aunt so he could be her mate for life, in order to obey what he was told to do and for survival.

Ann Hanson was the founding editor of Inukshuk newsletter in 1973, which became Nunatsiak News in 1976. She was the third commissioner of Nunavut. She now lives in Apex.



Annie Kimalu Palluq, an elder who lives in Iqaluit, looks at a family picture. Palluq was married under the Inuit arranged marriage tradition. (Photo by Jeff Pelletier)



Annie Kimalu Palluq is one of many Inuit elders who were married under the Inuit arranged marriage tradition. (Photo by Jeff Pelletier)



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