

MENADELOOK: AN INUPIAT TEACHER'S PHOTOGRAPHS DURING KNUD RASMUSSEN'S FIFTH THULE EXPEDITION

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ABSTRACT

This paper compares the contribution made by two outstanding men to our knowledge and understanding of Inuit culture in the early 1900s: Knud Rasmussen, the leader of the Fifth Thule Expedition, and Charles Menadelook, Inupiaq teacher and prodigious photographer of Native life in Alaska between 1907 and 1933. It illustrates the value of documenting cultures by their Indigenous members—via their means, like songs, tales, and stories, in the case of Rasmussen, or through their eyes, as in the case of Menadelook. To Menadelook, the camera became a “natural” way of looking at his own people, which helped make his photographs a much more intimate and informative source than many staged photos taken by members of the Fifth Thule Expedition.

Indigenous members of a society can provide invaluable insight, information, and understanding of their own culture and history. Two such men successfully contributed knowledge on Inuit life and culture in the early 1900s, one through scientific methods and the other, perhaps unintentionally, through his photographs. Knud Rasmussen (1878–1933) sought to determine the origins of the Inuit and their customs, spiritual beliefs, songs, and mythology during his epic trip on the Fifth Thule Expedition (FTE) from Greenland to Siberia in 1921–1924. The other man, Charles Menadelook (1892–1933, Fig. 1), was a Alaskan Inupiaq teacher with a passion for photography who took numerous precious photographs of Inuit life between 1907 and 1932. His photos depict changes his people were experiencing in Alaska, while Rasmussen documented the traditional lifestyle and belief systems, especially in Greenland and Canada. Both men contributed extensive knowledge on the Inuit people because they were part of that culture. By unfortunate coincidence, their lives ended the same year, 1933.

Rasmussen was internationally acclaimed for his several expeditions across the Arctic edges of Greenland and North America. His background and total acceptance by the people he set out to learn about were key factors in successfully attaining his goals. He grew up in western

Greenland, and his early upbringing and the Kalaallit (Greenlandic) heritage he received via his mother and grandmother obviously influenced his worldview, even though his Indigenous Kalaallit (Greenlandic) DNA was just one part of him. His first language was Kalaallisut, and he took great pride in his Greenlandic heritage. His playmates were Greenlandic children, and he lived their lifestyle, forming a strong kinship with the Greenlanders and being accepted as one of their own (Rasmussen [1927] 1999: xxxii). Kaj Birket-Smith, one of his expedition partners, said it best:

No matter whether it was Greenlanders or Eskimos in Canada and Alaska, he came to them as one of themselves. They unfolded their soul to the greatness and warmth of his being, and in return he received their simple tales of life and its struggles with the mysterious powers, their wild legends and fine poetry, with the open and understanding mind that can only be explained in one way: in his heart they touched strings that vibrated in harmony with them. (Bown 2015: xx)

Menadelook was born in Wales, Alaska, two years after the first American missionary schoolteachers arrived in the village. He developed a passion for photography and took his camera wherever he went on his many trips and



Figure 1. Charles Menadelook, self-portrait, early 1920s. Print from artificially scratched negative. Menadelook family collection; courtesy Eileen Norbert.

teaching missions. This passion and sheer enjoyment for taking photographs left a remarkable pictorial record of Alaskan Inupiat life of twenty-five years, between 1907 and 1932. He did not realize what a treasure he left behind (Norbert 2016). Menadelook preserved images of a vanishing life, scenes we could otherwise only read about and picture in our imaginations. His photographs bring his world to life in ways that words alone cannot, and they reflect the scenes of everyday Inupiaq existence: family, the arduous work and importance of hunting and gathering seasons, and the Inupiat way of life of the time. When he took his photographs, Alaskan Inupiat culture was still largely intact, but Western ways were slowly being adopted. Menadelook was teaching at a small govern-

ment school on Little Diomed Island when Rasmussen was in the Bering Strait area. There is one photograph of Rasmussen on Diomed in the fall of 1924, on his return from his short trip to Chukotka, Russia. We have no record that the two men ever met, even though Menadelook was probably in Nome for summer employment during Rasmussen's visit (Fig. 2). He would surely have taken photos of Rasmussen if they ever met.

When Rasmussen reached Alaska and visited the Inupiat, he stayed for less than six months, from May to late October 1924 (Bown 2015:248–249; Mathiasen 1945:98–107; Ostermann and Holtveld 1952). After visiting the Inuit in Canada, Rasmussen said, "I am glad to have had the good fortune to visit these people while they are still unchanged; to have found throughout the great expanse of territory from Greenland to the Pacific, a people not only one in race and language but also in their form of culture" (Rasmussen 1999:386).

It is unfortunate that when he briefly visited Diomed and Wales in September 1924, most of the local people were still at their summer camps fishing and gathering, on trading excursions, or moving to towns like Nome for summer employment. Even though the first decades of the twentieth century were a time of transition, as documented by Menadelook's photographs from both places (Figs. 3–6), legends and folklore were still important to the Inupiat, and Elders carrying those traditions had been born before intense contact with Western culture. Rich storytelling and Inupiat belief systems were still being practiced in both Wales and Diomed, even as missionaries and government teachers were trying to eradicate them. One epic tale at Diomed could take over a week to tell, like ancient legends about the time when the Bering land bridge existed between Alaska and Asia (Oquilluk 1973). Rasmussen would have seen that the Alaskan Inupiat embraced Christianity while continuing their spiritual customs, even more so than their brethren in Greenland.

Inupiat loved celebrations and Eskimo dancing that Rasmussen observed at other places. If he stayed longer, he would have gone on hunting trips that still followed ancient hunting rituals. Rasmussen saw the Inupiat culture in transition, but, as he was soon to realize, it was still strong and predominant (Ostermann and Holtveld 1952; Figs. 7–9; see Crowell, *this issue*).

Another aspect of Native Alaskan life that Rasmussen experienced firsthand was racial discrimination. When he and his Polar Inuit (Inughuit) companions arrived in Nome in 1924, he was astonished that he and his party



Figure 2. Charles Menadelook (left), next to Thomas Lopp on a government ship. Menadelook preferred his Inupiaq waterproof mukluks and has his ever-present camera. Kathleen Lopp Smith Collection, Alaska and Polar Regions Archives, University of Alaska Fairbanks.

were barred from entering a restaurant because “of their ragged appearance” (Rasmussen 1999:341). His two faithful traveling companions, Miteq and Arnarulunnguaq, were Greenlandic Eskimo (Inughuit). Their exclusion was most likely due to the fact that Nome was as segregated as any town in the continental U.S., with signs in some restaurant windows stating, “No Eskimos or dogs allowed” (Norbert 2016:98). The difference was that in other parts of the U.S. it was the law, whereas in Nome it was just “accepted practice” (Cole 1992). Carl Lomen, a prominent local businessman of Norwegian descent, graciously invited Rasmussen and his party to his home for dinner.

In 1924, Rasmussen saw that Eskimo people in Nome had to live at Sand Spit on the west side of town—again, not a law but a long-established local practice. The Native population swelled when village residents camped for the

summer here to sell their ivory carvings and old artifacts, fur clothing, and other goods; traded with other Natives; and worked for cash-paying jobs (Fig. 10). Some worked as longshoremen, laborers on mining crews, or reindeer herders and took other seasonal work. Others delivered mail between Nome and the villages. Some had small schooners and traded up and down the coast. It was from those people that Rasmussen collected most of the ethnographic information and objects that he obtained in Nome (see Ostermann and Holtveld 1952:63–66), particularly from the King Islanders, with whom he interacted more extensively.

Rasmussen was not the first explorer/ethnographer who came to Nome. Michael (“Big Mike”) Kazingnuk (1899–1964), originally from Big Diomedé, was an enterprising young Inupiaq. When he was only fourteen,



Figure 3. Women at Diomedé splitting walrus hides. The school is above them. Spring 1923. Photo: Charles Menadelook (Menadelook family collection; courtesy Eileen Norbert).

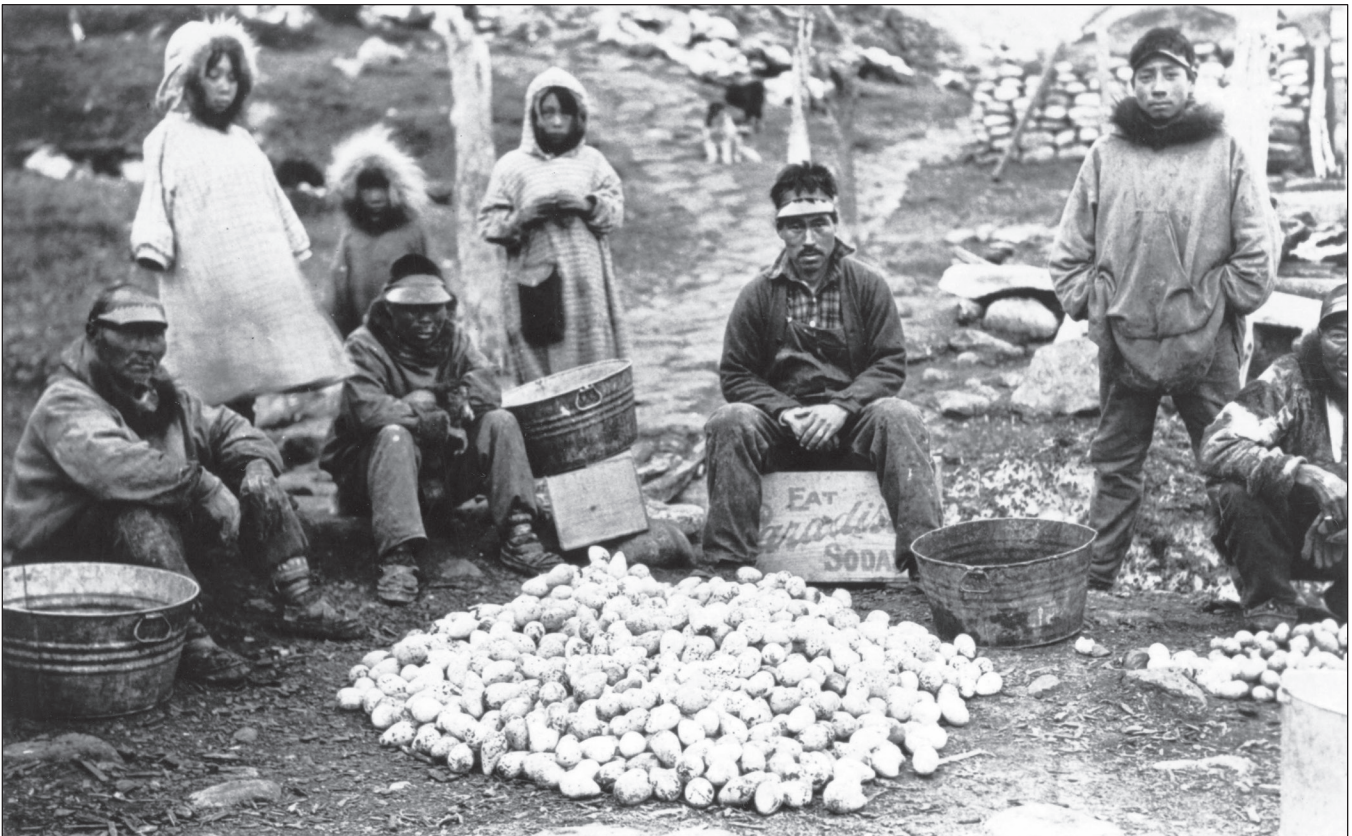


Figure 4. Men and youth looking over a harvest of murre eggs. Diomedé, 1920s. Fisher Photograph Collection, Charles Menadelook Photographs. Alaska State Library, Juneau.



Figure 5. Menadelook's Diomedes students saluting American flag. Photo: Charles Menadelook (Menadelook family collection; courtesy Eileen Norbert).



Figure 6. Women in Wales playing tug of war during the Fourth of July festivities. Inupiat blended traditional activities with new Western celebrations. Community members made and donated valuable prizes like wolverine, seal, and ugruk hides, bleached seal skins, sewing materials, snowshoes, hunting gear, shells, and other fine items. Photo: Charles Menadelook (Menadelook family collection; courtesy Eileen Norbert).



Figure 7. Extended family preparing sod cover for a new sod iglu. Shishmaref, 1921. Photo: Charles Menadelook (Menadelook family collection; courtesy Eileen Norbert).



Figure 8. Two large umiaks with sails. Photo: Charles Menadelook (Menadelook family collection; courtesy Eileen Norbert).



Figure 9. Iokienna with a bounty of seals caught in a seal net. Extended family set seal nets north of Wales. He was the father of Faye Ongtowsruk, owner of the reindeer herd at Wales and first cousin to Menadelook. Wales, 1920s. Photo: Charles Menadelook (Menadelook family collection; courtesy Eileen Norbert).



Figure 10. King Island women in Nome, probably during Fourth of July. Early 1930s. Photo: Charles Menadelook (Menadelook family collection; courtesy Eileen Norbert).

he was gathering scrap metal around Nome and selling it to the smelting plant. Some years later, polar explorer Roald Amundsen asked Kazingnuk to work for him for four years. Kazingnuk had a reputation as an industrious, knowledgeable, and intelligent young man. He spoke Inupiaq, English, Siberian Yupik, and Chukchi. Amundsen offered Kazingnuk \$50 a month to accompany his expedition to the North Pole. Kazingnuk refused, saying it was too little pay for such a dangerous job, but he would do it for \$150 a month. Amundsen replied, “Oh! Smart Eskimo, heh? Now get the hell out quick and don’t let me see you again” (cited from Kazingnuk 1937). In the late 1800s and early 1900s, Inupiat men went to night school to learn English and math specifically to trade with the passing whaling and trading ships. They also did not like to be cheated (Norbert 2016:19).

In another interaction, Vilhjálmur Stefansson, another famous Arctic explorer, bought ten sleds made by Inupiat men in Nome for his Canadian Arctic Expedition of 1913–1916. Father Bellarmine LaFortune (1869–1947),

a Catholic priest, provided a workshop in the back of the Catholic Church where Inupiat men carved ivory, made and repaired hunting equipment, built sleds, and made boats to sell (Renner and Ray 1979). Thus, the Inupiat used their traditional skills and expertise for profit within the Euroamerican economy, another indicator of how Menadelook’s world was changing but also showing how adaptable the Inupiat people were.

Nonetheless, the schools, churches, and the movie theaters of Nome were all segregated. Prior to the time of Rasmussen’s visit, Native Alaskans could not officially mine for gold or stake a gold mining claim because they were not recognized as United States citizens. This changed when Congress passed the U.S. Citizenship Act of 1924, the year Rasmussen arrived in Alaska. Against a backdrop of inequitable treatment and institutionalized prejudice, Inuit were quick to learn and integrated their traditional trading methods and networks with Western material culture, traveling extensively along the shores of Alaska and Siberia and up to northern Canada.

Menadelook's father, Kokituk, and grandfather Ilingnok were two such men. On their trading excursions, they practiced spouse exchange and had children up and down the Alaska coast and in Canada, and had relatives via a chain of relations up to faraway Greenland. These types of connections underpinned Indigenous trading and were operative long before the twentieth century (Fig. 11).

In their own ways, Knud Rasmussen and Charles Menadelook both contributed historical knowledge about the Arctic and the Inuit people in the early decades of the twentieth century. Rasmussen's work, of course, was epic and comprehensive in scope. He documented aspects of Inuit life not known before and upon which further work continues to be expanded. As Diamond Jenness said it, "Dr. Rasmussen understood and interpreted, as no one else was able to do, the inner spirit of the Eskimos, the reasons that underlay their customs, their conceptions of life and death and the world that lives beyond" (Bown 2015:304). He was able to accomplish so much because he was keenly aware of the Inuit style of communication and, with his Greenlandic upbringing, respectfully let his informants share their knowledge in their own way and in their own time. If Rasmussen captured the invisible, the stories and legends of the people, it can be said that Menadelook captured the *visible*, the images of an era that would pass. His photographic content reflected important Inupiaq values such as family, hard work, cooperation, and subsistence. Rasmussen and Menadelook did it so effectively because both men were accepted wholeheartedly, trusted and respected by the Inuit people they lived or visited with. Even though Menadelook was Inupiaq, many of the villages he taught in were of other tribes. One's identity—that is, where one came from, the tribe one belonged to, and one's family—was an essential part of people's culture. One of Menadelook's students, Dinah Sagoonick from the village of Shaktoolik, far from Menadelook's native Wales, paid

him a tribute with her words: "I think of him as my own," a sentiment shared wherever he taught. His former students said of Menadelook and his wife Etta, "They were good people" (Norbert 2016:101).

Rosita Worl (2016:9–10), president of the Sealaska Heritage Institute, anthropologist, and Indigenous leader, said of Menadelook, "Photographs of Inupiat lifestyles in the 1920s are rare, and photographs taken by an indigenous person are near nonexistent." She added that Menadelook's photos were "determined to show that a member of an indigenous society can provide significant information and understanding of one's own culture and history" (Worl 2016:9–10).

Little did Menadelook know that his rare photographs of Inupiat village life from 1907 through 1932 documented a vanishing era for his people. Rasmussen, on the other hand, was very conscious that he was documenting Inuit life during a very significant period of change. It could also be said that Rasmussen provided an Indigenous perspective to his work among the Inuit during his FTE, due to his Inuit heritage and command of language and lifeways. But even with this, Rasmussen was "outside looking in." Menadelook was "inside" and he was recording images of a life and community he was an integral part of. When I wrote the book *Menadelook*, I made sure that all cultural information shown in Menadelook's photographs came from Inupiat Elders and family members. It was essential to have this Inupiaq perspective in telling our history. In every community, informants always requested that I ask the "village historian" to make sure their information was correct. I also found that some historical narratives written by outsiders differ from our own eyewitness accounts of the same events.

We are deeply grateful to both men for contributing their complementary historic knowledge in texts and photographs of the Inuit culture they observed.



Figure 11. Joseph Wegazuruk (right) trading with a Siberian for his prime wolverine pelts. His Eskimo “suitcases” are at his feet. The Siberian’s haircut was unique to his people. Wales, pre-1918. Photo: Charles Menadelook (Menadelook family collection; courtesy Eileen Norbert).

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