

Tukiliit: the Stone People Who Live in the Wind. An Introduction to Inuksuit and Other Stone Figures of the North

Author: Ogilvie, Astrid E. J.

Source: Arctic, Antarctic, and Alpine Research, 42(2) : 239-240

Published By: Institute of Arctic and Alpine Research (INSTAAR),
University of Colorado

URL: <https://doi.org/10.1657/1938-4246-42.2.239>

BioOne Complete (complete.BioOne.org) is a full-text database of 200 subscribed and open-access titles in the biological, ecological, and environmental sciences published by nonprofit societies, associations, museums, institutions, and presses.

Your use of this PDF, the BioOne Complete website, and all posted and associated content indicates your acceptance of BioOne's Terms of Use, available at www.bioone.org/terms-of-use.

Usage of BioOne Complete content is strictly limited to personal, educational, and non - commercial use. Commercial inquiries or rights and permissions requests should be directed to the individual publisher as copyright holder.

BioOne sees sustainable scholarly publishing as an inherently collaborative enterprise connecting authors, nonprofit publishers, academic institutions, research libraries, and research funders in the common goal of maximizing access to critical research.

that have been placed in the polar and Arctic landscape by Inuit and others, and which have a combination of spiritual, magical, and highly practical properties.

The book begins by noting the Inuit sense of the power of words. In the past, it was the custom for Inuit to give a word or a string of words as a gift, in the form of an incantation. It was believed that this gift endowed the receiver with special powers to see or understand things that had not been seen or comprehended before. This belief in the power of the spoken and written word is common to many cultures, and finds expression in the saying, “the pen is mightier than the sword.” A person’s name was imbued with particular importance, and the belief that knowing someone’s name can give an enemy power over that person is relatively common. In modern Iceland, for example, it is still common practice to keep the name that a child is to be called a secret until it is baptized. This tradition has its foundation in the Christian concept that the Devil will have power over an unbaptized child if he knows its name. Tied up with this is the idea that certain names are taboo and not to be spoken. In present-day popular culture we may look to the “Harry Potter” books where the Dark Lord is referred to as “He Who Must Not Be Named.” However, the hero, Harry, has the inherent courage and power to be able to state his real name. Many more examples could be given, and clearly the tradition of a belief in the power of words has ancient origins. In the spirit of the Inuit customs surrounding such matters, the author presents the words and images in the book as a gift to the reader.

The author, Norman Hallendy, has spent more than 40 years traveling in the North in the company of Inuit elders. His purpose in this book is to illuminate and describe the stone figures and cairns that are so much a part of human culture, not only in the North but elsewhere. Examples are given from India, Mongolia, Siberia, Iceland, the Faroe Islands, and the Valley of Fire in Nevada. However, it is the region known to “southerners” as the Arctic, but which has other names given to it by those who have dwelled there for generations, such as *Numatsiaq*, “the beautiful land,” which is the main focus of the book. On this land have been placed many figures of stone. To the unpracticed eye, such a stone figure may represent nothing more than a serendipitous arrangement of stones in the landscape, a special kind of sculpture—an object of art, with no other purpose than to please the eye. Nothing could be further from the truth. By means of visual images and his laconic but elegant prose, Hallendy shows the reader the many types of “silent messengers” that may be said to people the Arctic, and which encompass a unique form of communication. Many words are used to describe these stone figures of the Arctic. The best known is *inuksuk*, which means “that which acts in the capacity of a human”—in other words, they act as helpers to humans (p. 28). The plural of the word is rendered thus: two such figures are *inuksuuk* and more than two is *inuksuit*—the plural is often incorrectly rendered as “inuksuks” (p. 74). The spellings given above are the most widely used, but there are variations in different parts of the Arctic (p. 74). The term *inuksuk* may be compared to the English word “tree,” in that “tree” denotes a great variety of different plants. In this same way, *inuksuk* is often used to apply to all stone figures. Hallendy states, however, that this is incorrect, for, strictly speaking, not all stone figures are *inuksuk*. Thus, for example, an *innunguaq* is an image or object in the likeness of a person, and is not considered an *inuksuk* (p. 60). The image that has become an Arctic icon, and which southern entrepreneurs have adopted for a myriad of logos representing items from beer to the Vancouver 2010 Winter Olympics, should thus be termed correctly an *innunguaq* and not an *inuksuk*. Because of this confusion, the author suggests that, as

TUKILIIT: THE STONE PEOPLE WHO LIVE IN THE WIND. AN INTRODUCTION TO INUKSUIT AND OTHER STONE FIGURES OF THE NORTH. By Norman Hallendy. Vancouver/Toronto and Fairbanks, Alaska: Douglas and McIntyre and University of Alaska Press, 2009. 127 pp. Brief text in Inuktitut, French, Spanish, German, and Japanese; further reading \$19.95 (paperback). ISBN 139781602230576/101602230579.

Inuit stone figures have served as a unique form of communication for centuries, and this slim but very potent volume provides an excellent initiation into the essential nature of these figures. The book contains many stunningly beautiful and haunting photographs, most of them taken by the author, mainly from northern regions, including Baffin Island, Greenland, Iceland, and the Faroe Islands. They are illuminated by a series of concise but evocative descriptions and discourses on the mysterious stone figures, of which *inuksuit* are a major category,

DOI: 10.1657/1938-4246-42.2.239

a general term, a better word is *tukiliik* (pl. *tukiliit*) which literally means “that which has meaning” (p. 28) and which can thus potentially refer to all stone objects.

Much of the book is taken up with an elucidation of all the different kinds of *tukiliit*, of which there are very many. Their functions are also explained. Thus, as noted above, *inuksuit* act as helpers to humans. They can act as indicators showing, for example, the depth of the snow; places where food, supplies, or articles have been cached; safe or dangerous crossing places; the deep or shallow side of a river; a spot where ice was dangerous in spring; a good spot for egg-gathering; the direction of the pole star; and numerous other places of importance. Different kinds of *inuksuit* have different names. Thus, on southwest Baffin Island, Hallendy studied more than 18 kinds of standing stone structures, each with a different name and a different function. Some examples are: *aulaqut*, an *inuksuk* for frightening caribou; *niptaniq*, a lookout marker for game; *nakkatain*, an *inuksuk* pointing to a good fishing place; and *nalumaikkutaq*, whose name literally means “deconfuser.” It acts as a device to jog the memory, reminding travelers of a certain action or direction to take when they reach it (p. 76).

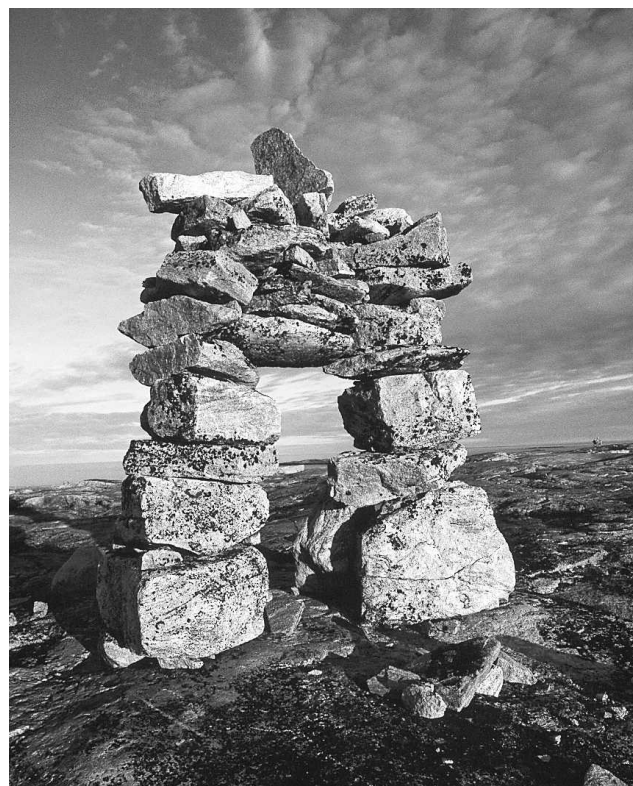
Made of loose stone, *tukiliit* can be found in countless sizes, shapes and forms (p. 80). However, Hallendy suggests that even a casual observer will recognize five general shapes among the countless possibilities. The first group contains the *innunguait*, with distinctive human-like forms; the second group is made up of the *tikkuutit*, or pointers. The third group consists of *inuksumarik* or *inuksukjuaq*, huge structures that can be seen at a distance (p. 84). Another group of special stone objects are named *sakkabluniit*. They often look like *inuksuit*, but they are not; rather, they are related to some spiritual entity or place. Thus, for example, the *angaku’habvik* or *angakkururvik* is both an object and a place. Shamans were initiated where these stone structures stood, making these sites among the most respected places on the metaphysical landscape. A *tunillarvik*, or a *tunirrsirvik*, is a single stone believed to provide healing and protection to those who venerate it and leave it gifts. A *tupqujaq* takes the form of a doorway, through which the shaman passes into the spirit world (p. 41).

To really understand the nature of *tukiliit*, it is important to remember that for Inuit in the past, the faculty of visualization—“being able to record in the mind every detail of the landscape and the objects upon it—used to be essential to survival. Part of this skill was the ability to memorize the location of places in relation to one another, and in stretches of featureless landscape, an *inuksuk* was a great helper” (p. 88). Thus, the location of an *inuksuk* was as important as the object itself.

Inuksuit were also used as memorials. The well-known Arctic explorer, Knud Rasmussen, documented a tragic tale he heard in 1930. In the community of Kamigluk, all the men were going fishing, but the women were to stay behind. The men urged them not to fish from the edge of the ice, but the women did so all the same. Suddenly the ice broke loose. Except for one woman, they did not dare jump ashore. They drifted out to sea and were lost (p. 55).

But when the men came home, they sorrowed so deeply over the loss of their women that they built cairns (*inuksuit*) up on the shore, just as many cairns as there were women lost. They did this because they wanted the souls of the drowned women to be on dry land and not out in the wet sea (p. 56).

Hallendy states that when Inuit elders are asked how long their people have been building *inuksuit*, their answer is usually “Before we can remember.” Clearly, they are ancient. However, they have also been adopted as modern memorials in places far



An example of a stone figure imbued with power; a *tupqujaq* or doorway, through which a shaman (*angakok*) passed into the world of spirits.

away from their Arctic origins. Thus, Peter Irniq, former Commissioner of Nunavut, constructed a memorial dedicated to Inuit soldiers who died during the D-Day landings of 1944, at Juno Beach in Normandy, France. It has a “window” at the top, as some *inuksuit* do. This is to “enable the spirits of the fallen to look in the direction of Nunatsiaq, their beautiful land, and to allow those back home in Canada to look towards the sacred ground where their loved ones died” (p. 56). In another corner of the world, in Kandahar, the city founded by Alexander the Great in 330 BC, stands a memorial fashioned in 2001 by Canadian infantrymen from pieces of slate found in the vicinity of their military base. Originally in honor of four men killed by “friendly fire,” this *innunguaq* now stands as a memorial to all those killed or wounded in Afghanistan. A plaque at its foot contains this statement: “In addition to their earthly functions, certain *inuksuit* had spiritual connotations and were objects of veneration, often marking the threshold of the spiritual landscape, or, in other words, Sacred Ground. We hope this place will remain sacred and that the spirits of our fallen comrades will find their way home to peace and rest” (p. 58).

Hallendy is clearly a master of both the written word and the visual image. With his stunning photographs as a backdrop, and a narrative that is both highly informative and profoundly respectful, his erudition and love for his subject shine through this book. In short, he has produced an eloquent and powerful *tukilik*.

ASTRID E. J. OGILVIE

Institute of Arctic and Alpine Research (INSTAAR)
University of Colorado, 450 UCB
Boulder, Colorado 80309-0450, U.S.A.