Episode Book

EPISODE #5976

What North of North Assumes You Know About Inuit

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SYNOPSIS

North of North drops you into Ice Cove and never stops to explain anything — which is exactly the point. So when a listener wrote in admitting that "Eskimo" was basically the whole extent of her Arctic vocabulary, we decided to do the work properly. This episode covers who the Inuit actually are: roughly 155,000 people across four countries speaking dialects of one language family, descended from the Thule who spread across the top of the world a thousand years ago. We get into the word "Eskimo" itself — why it's not the raw-meat slur most people think, why Canada and Greenland dropped it in 1977, and why Alaska never did. Then the traditional half: a diet that got 75% of its energy from fat, vitamin C from raw seal liver and muktuk, the amauti as both baby carrier and social document, and gender roles that bent whenever survival required it. Finally, the modern half — a fully contemporary people who are also fully Inuk, and a show made by Inuit hands in Iqaluit that refuses to translate itself for outsiders.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

So the thing about the show is that it never stops to explain anything.



Herman

Right, and that's the whole design. You're dropped into Ice Cove and expected to keep up.



Corn

Which is why Hannah sent us this. She's been watching North of North and realized halfway through that she was nodding along to things she couldn't actually define.



Herman

She said it well, too. That she grew up with the word Eskimo, knows it's not what people say now, and then hit the wall of realizing that was basically the whole extent of it.



Corn

The prompt is really a confession of ignorance and a request to fix it. Who are the Inuit, what do the groups across Canada and Greenland and Alaska actually share, are they part of the broader Indigenous world or something separate, what did traditional life look like and how much of it is still standing. And then the modern half, which is the part the show puts in front of you: people who are completely contemporary and also completely Inuk, and the show assumes you understand what that means.



Herman

And the specific stuff. Walrus dick baseball. Bum hopping. The no-yelling parenting thing, which she read in Hunt, Gather, Parent and wants checked.



Corn

So let's do it properly. Start with the map.



Herman

The map is the thing most people get wrong. Inuit isn't one community. It's roughly a hundred and fifty-five thousand people spread across four countries. Canada about seventy thousand, Greenland about fifty thousand, Denmark seventeen thousand, the United States about sixteen and a half thousand. That's a span of five thousand kilometers, from the Bering Strait all the way to eastern Greenland.



Corn

And they're all speaking versions of the same language.



Herman

A continuum, yes. Inupiaq up in Alaska, Inuvialuktun in the western Canadian Arctic, Inuinnaqtun, Inuktitut across Nunavut and Nunavik, Kalaallisut in Greenland. Those sit in the Eskaleut family, sometimes called Inuit-Yupik-Unangan. And the surprise for most people is that Inuktitut and West Greenlandic are close enough that they're often described as prestige dialects of the same thing. A person from Iqaluit and a person from Nuuk can, with some effort, understand each other.



Corn

Which is a remarkable thing to hold together for a thousand years across that distance.



Herman

Except they didn't hold it together by trying. They held it together by moving. The ancestors are the Thule people, who emerged near the Bering Strait around the year one thousand and spread east across the whole Arctic in a couple of centuries. When they got to the eastern Arctic they ran into the Dorset culture, who were already there.



Corn

And the Dorset are the Tuniit.



Herman

In Inuktitut, yes. The people the Thule displaced. And the Inuit memory of them is that they were giants. Bigger, stronger, and they disappeared. There's a whole oral tradition about encounters with them.



Corn

So the Inuit didn't arrive to an empty Arctic. They replaced somebody.



Herman

In most of the places they went, yes. The Dorset were gone by around 1300, and the Thule are the direct ancestors of every Inuit group alive today. That's the through-line. Same people, same toolkit, same language family, spread across the top of the world.



Corn

Which raises the question the prompt is really asking. If you've got a population that size spread across four countries and multiple languages, at what point does it stop being one culture?



Herman

It's one culture the way "Mediterranean" is one culture. There's a shared core and enormous regional variation. And the show is set specifically in Nunavut, so it's a Nunavut story as much as an Inuit one. Which matters, because the references are local.



Corn

And the show gets to do that because the people making it are from there. Inuit showrunners, Inuit writers, filmed in Iqaluit, costumes made in Nunavut by Inuit artists. The co-creator said it was important that the parkas and anything traditional were made there, by Inuit hands.



Herman

Which is a real break from how this used to work. Thirty years ago an Arctic show would have had the wardrobe flown in from Toronto.



Corn

So the opacity isn't an accident. It's a choice. They're not explaining walrus dick baseball to you because you're not the audience they're writing for.



Herman

And Hannah's watching it as an outsider and noticing that every few minutes there's a reference she can't place. That's the experience the show is deliberately creating.



Corn

Alright. Let's start with the word, because that's where she started.



Herman

Eskimo. It's an exonym, meaning a name given from outside. The etymology most people repeat is that it comes from a Cree word meaning "eater of raw meat," which is the insult version. That's discredited. The better-supported origin is Innu-aimun, where it means something like "a person who laces a snowshoe."



Corn

So the slur story is itself a bit of a myth.



Herman

A myth that got traction because it fit a narrative. But the etymology isn't really the point. The point is that in 1977, the Inuit Circumpolar Council formally declared the term offensive, and Canada and Greenland shifted to Inuit. That's the standing position. In Canada, Eskimo is not the word.



Corn

Except in Alaska, where it's still in use.



Herman

Widely used, and for a lot of Alaska Natives it's a point of pride. The World Eskimo-Indian Olympics kept Eskimo in its name until 1973, and there's a whole generation of Alaskan athletes who competed under that banner.



Corn

So the same word is a slur in one part of the Arctic and a self-description in another.



Herman

Because the Arctic isn't one place. And there's a linguistic reason underneath it, which is that the Alaska Native Language Center pointed out that Inuit was never a natural fit for Yupik speakers. So "Inuit" as a universal replacement doesn't actually cover everybody the way people assume.



Corn

Explain the Yupik thing, because I think that's the piece most outsiders miss entirely.



Herman

The umbrella term Eskimo covers two groups. The Inuit on one side, and the Yupik on the other. Yupik are in western Alaska and across the Bering Strait into Siberia. They're related, they share the language family, but they generally do not self-identify as Inuit. And then Aleut is a third branch, further out still.



Corn

So there are three distinct peoples under one old label, and only one of them is Inuit.



Herman

Correct. Which is why "Inuit" as a blanket term for everybody in the Arctic has a problem built into it. It's more accurate than Eskimo in Canada and Greenland, and less accurate as a description of Alaska.



Corn

So when Hannah asks, are the Inuit part of the broader Indigenous world or a separate category, the answer is both.



Herman

Legally in Canada they're Aboriginal. The 1939 Re Eskimos Supreme Court ruling put them under federal jurisdiction, and the 1982 Constitution Act recognized Inuit as Aboriginal peoples. So in Canadian law they're Indigenous, full stop. But culturally and linguistically they're a distinct category from First Nations.



Corn

Distinct how.



Herman

Different language family. Different arrival time. Different material culture. The First Nations of the Canadian south are largely Algonquian, Athabaskan, Iroquoian speakers with agriculture and woodland hunting. The Inuit are a maritime hunting culture that arrived in the Arctic about a thousand years ago. The overlap is that they're both Indigenous to what's now Canada, and they're often grouped together in policy. Beyond that they're different worlds.



Corn

And the show actually dramatizes that. There's a Cree character, Kuuk, in the show, who's the outsider in Ice Cove in a different way than the Inuit characters are outsiders to the south.



Herman

Which is smart writing, because it puts the mixed-Indigenous relationship on screen instead of pretending the categories are interchangeable.



Corn

What about the political layer? Is there a pan-Inuit organization.



Herman

The Inuit Circumpolar Council, founded June 1977 in Barrow, Alaska. It represents around a hundred and eighty thousand Inuit and Yupik across the United States, Canada, Greenland and Russia. That's the political expression of the idea that these are one people spread across four countries.



Corn

Which is itself an unusual thing. A single people divided by four national borders, all of which are relatively recent and none of which were drawn by them.



Herman

And that's why the ICC exists. It's the body that can speak to the Arctic Council, to the UN, to the four governments at once. Without it, Inuit interests get split into four separate national conversations and never add up.



Corn

Alright, so we've got the who. Now the traditional life, because that's what the show keeps referencing without explaining.



Herman

Food first, and the number that surprises people is that the traditional diet was about seventy-five percent of daily energy from fat. That's the opposite of what a modern nutritionist would design, and it's the only thing that works in that climate.



Corn

Why fat specifically.



Herman

Because it's the densest energy source available and it doesn't require you to eat constantly. A hunter out on the ice needs calories that come in a compact form and burn slowly. Fat does that. Protein alone won't sustain you in deep cold, and carbohydrates are simply not there year-round.



Corn

So what were they eating.



Herman

Bowhead whale, seal, polar bear, muskox, caribou, fish. And then the part that surprises people, which is that they got vitamin C without any plant source at all.



Corn

From where.



Herman

Raw ringed seal liver and whale skin. Muktuk, the skin and blubber of a whale, is dense with vitamin C. The Inuit didn't get scurvy on a diet with almost no fruit or vegetables because the animals they ate carried what they needed.



Corn

That's a striking fact to sit with. The entire "you need plants for vitamin C" assumption is a temperate-climate assumption.



Herman

It is. And it's a good example of why "traditional diet" conversations that happen in temperate countries don't map onto the Arctic. The whole framework of what counts as a balanced meal was built somewhere else, and it just doesn't transfer.



Corn

Clothing next, because the amauti is the piece the show keeps putting on screen.



Herman

The amauti is the woman's parka with a pouch on the back, and the pouch exists so an infant can be carried skin to skin, inside the mother's warmth, in a climate where a stroller is not a thing that exists. But it's not just functional. The cut and trim of a parka signaled age, marital status, and kin group. You could read a person's position in the community off their clothing.



Corn

So the parka was a document.



Herman

In a way that's more precise than the modern equivalent. And the modern version is a hybrid. Synthetic shells over sealskin and fur, because synthetics are lighter and dry faster, but the seal and the fur still work better in certain conditions.



Corn

Gender roles.



Herman

Complementary, but the standard description oversimplifies it. Men hunted and fished, women sewed, cooked, processed food, raised children. But women hunted when they needed to, and men who were away from camp for days were expected to sew and cook for themselves. The division was a division of labor, not a rigid rule about what a person



Herman (continued)

could do.



Corn

So when people today say "traditional Inuit gender roles," they're usually describing a division of tasks and treating it as a division of persons.



Herman

Which is the same mistake people make about a lot of pre-industrial societies. The work was gendered. The capability wasn't. If a woman was the only adult in camp, she hunted. If a man was alone on the land, he sewed. The rules bent because survival didn't care about them.



Corn

Marriage and family structure.



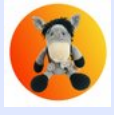
Herman

Not strictly monogamous. Open marriages, polygamy, divorce and remarriage were all known. Marriages were often arranged, sometimes in infancy. And households were flexible, often multi-family, headed by an elder or a respected man.



Corn

So the nuclear family as the default unit is a very recent import.



Herman

In the Arctic, yes. The functional unit was the extended household, sometimes with shifting membership as people moved between camps. Which is not the same thing as instability. It's a different way of organizing the group around shared work rather than shared bloodline.



Corn

Religion.



Herman

No formal leadership. Ritual specialists were called angakut. And the central figure is Nuliajuk, sometimes called Sedna, the Sea Woman, who controls the marine mammals. If she's angry, the seals don't come. If she's appeased, they do.



Corn

Which is a very practical theology for a hunting culture.



Herman

And the quote that captures the whole thing better than any description is what an angakkuq named Aua told the explorer Knud Rasmussen in the early twentieth century. He said, "We don't believe. We fear."



Corn

That's a completely different religious frame than the one most listeners are carrying around.



Herman

It is. It's not faith in a benevolent order. It's management of dangerous forces. The supernatural isn't a source of comfort, it's a set of things you have to handle correctly or people die. And you can see why that's the frame in a place where getting the weather wrong or offending the wrong spirit means no food for the whole camp.



Corn

So it's not "do you believe in Nuliajuk" the way a modern person would answer a question about God.



Herman

Right. It's not a proposition you assent to. It's a relationship you maintain. The question isn't whether she's real. The question is whether you've done the things that keep her from taking the seals away.



Corn

Then Christianity arrives.



Herman

The first Anglican mission post was at Blacklead Island in 1894. The first Catholic mission at Chesterfield Inlet in 1912. By the mid-twentieth century most Inuit had formally converted. And as of the 2021 census, seventy-one percent of Canadian Inuit identify as Christian.



Corn

Which is why the show can have devout characters without that being a contradiction with them being Inuit.



Herman

It's not a contradiction at all. Angles, Catholics, Pentecostals, a whole range of traditions. And the older layers didn't vanish. They folded in, or they went quiet, or they're being recovered now.



Corn

That's the through-line of the whole episode, isn't it. Things get suppressed, and then they come back in a different form.



Herman

Which takes us to the modern half of the prompt, and the show's actual subject.



Corn

Start with Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit, because that's the frame the show is operating inside.



Herman

Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit, usually abbreviated IQ, is the phrase for Inuit traditional knowledge, and the Nunavut government has codified it into components. Inuuqatigiitsiarniq, which is respecting others. Pijitsirniq, serving family and community. Aajiiqatigiinniq, consensus decision-making. And Avatittinnik Kamatsiarniq, care for land and animals.



Corn

Which sounds like a list of values on a poster, but the point is that it's a governing framework.



Herman

That's exactly the point. It's not folklore sitting behind glass. It's what Nunavut's public service is supposed to be organized around. So when the show centers Siaja in a community where decision-making runs by consensus and the elder's opinion carries weight, that's not local color. That's IQ being enacted.



Corn

Can you give an example of what that actually looks like in a scene?



Herman

The clearest one is the way disputes get handled. In a southern workplace show, a conflict between two characters escalates until a boss makes a ruling. In North of North, the conflict gets routed through someone older, and the resolution isn't a verdict, it's a restoration of the relationship. The elder doesn't decide who was right. The elder decides what the community needs, and then the two people are expected to live with that.



Corn

So the drama isn't "who wins," it's "how does the group stay intact."



Herman

Which is a fundamentally different narrative engine. And it's why the show can feel slow to viewers who are used to conflict-driven plotting. It's not slow. It's operating on a different theory of what a story is for.



Corn

Now let's do the parenting thing, because that's the part of the prompt where there's an actual popular claim to check.



Herman

The claim comes from Jean Briggs's book Never in Anger, published in 1970. She was an anthropologist who lived with the Utku Inuit on Baffin Island, and she documented that the adults around her almost never yelled at children, and treated anger itself as socially inappropriate.



Corn

And the quote that captures it.



Herman

She wrote that the families she lived with "never acted in anger toward me, although they were angry with me an awful lot." That's the key distinction. It's not that anger didn't exist. It's that expressing it was managed. The emotions were all there, and the display of them was governed by a rule.



Corn

So the popular version that Inuit never get angry is a mistranslation of the finding.



Herman

It's a flattening of it. And then Michaeleen Doucleff's book Hunt, Gather, Parent generalized Briggs's finding into a pan-Inuit parenting style, which is the version most readers now have.



Corn

And that generalization is the problem.



Herman

It's the problem. Briggs's fieldwork was with one community on Baffin Island. The Utku. Not with the Inuit as a whole. And there's real variation between regions, between families, between generations. The claim about no yelling is a good insight into one community, and it's being sold as a universal rule about a hundred and fifty-five thousand people across four countries.



Corn

Which is the same mistake the whole episode keeps running into. Somebody studies one group, and the popular version becomes everything.



Herman

It's a common pattern in popular anthropology. The finding is real, and the scope shrinks on the way to the bestseller list.



Corn

So if a listener has read Hunt, Gather, Parent and taken the no-yelling thing as a fact about Inuit parenting, what should they replace it with?



Herman

They should replace it with the actual finding, which is more interesting. Briggs didn't say the Utku never felt anger. She said they had a whole system for handling it. Anger was treated as something that could damage a relationship, so the community developed ways



Herman (continued)

to redirect it, to not escalate, to let it cool before it did harm. That's not the absence of emotion. That's emotional discipline, and it's a skill, and it's taught.



Corn

Which is a much harder thing to put on a book cover.



Herman

Much harder. "Inuit parents don't yell" sells. "One Arctic community developed a sophisticated system for managing conflict without escalation" is a dissertation.



Corn

And now the residential schools, because the show brings them in through elder Elisapee and doesn't explain them.



Herman

The system ran from the nineteenth century to 1997. About a hundred and fifty thousand children went through it nationally. Attendance was compulsory from 1894. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which ran from 2008 to 2015, called it cultural genocide. Over four thousand student deaths are documented, and the estimates run above six thousand.



Corn

And the Inuit experience inside it was different from the First Nations experience in a specific way.



Herman

A specific and important way. Inuit populations were too small to support a high school in every community, so Inuit students were boarded in a handful of larger centers. Aklavik, Iqaluit, Yellowknife, Inuvik, Kuujjuaq. And the effect of concentrating them there was that young Inuit from across the Arctic met each other for the first time.



Corn

So the system designed to erase the culture accidentally built the network that would later organize to defend it.



Herman

That's the bitter irony. The 1960s and 70s political awakening in the Canadian Arctic has its roots in these boarding institutions. The people who went on to build the Inuit political organizations met each other in those schools.



Corn

The show handles this through Elisapee. She's written as a residential school survivor, and the series touches the trauma but doesn't lecture about it.



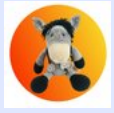
Herman

Which is a choice. There's a review that described the show as touching on the lingering trauma of residential schools and child-family separations. But it's woven in, not delivered as a lesson.



Corn

So a viewer who doesn't know the history might miss what they're looking at.



Herman

They might. Elisapee's silences, the way she handles certain conversations, the way she is with children, all of it carries weight that a viewer with the context will read differently than a viewer without it. The show trusts you to bring something or to feel the absence of it.



Corn

Now revival and reinvention, which is the thing the show actually celebrates.



Herman

Tattoos first, because the show has a visual map of them. Kakiniit, or tunniit, are the women's facial tattoos, roughly four thousand years old, and they recorded origin, family and achievements on the face. So they weren't decoration. They were a permanent record of who you were.



Corn

Banned by missionaries.



Herman

Banned in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. And revived starting in the early 2000s.



Corn

And the show puts the generation gap on screen.



Herman

Elder Elisapee has none. The middle generation, Neevee and Auntie Vicky, have hand and facial tattoos. The young generation, Siaja and Millie, have hand tattoos only. So you can see what was lost, what got recovered, and what's being taken up in a partial way by the generation that's inheriting it.



Corn

That's a very specific visual choice.



Herman

It's a whole argument about cultural transmission, made with skin. And it's more honest than a version where everybody has the full tattoos. Because the reality is that the recovery is uneven. Some people have the full face. Some people have the hands. Some people have nothing and are still deciding. The show is documenting a process that's still happening, not a finished revival.



Corn

Throat singing.



Herman

Katajjaq. Traditionally two women, face to face, singing against each other to see who outlasts who. It's a game, not a performance. And it was originally sung while the men were out hunting, which tells you who the audience was and who it wasn't.



Corn

And now it's on streaming platforms.



Herman

Nunavik katajjaniq became Quebec's first intangible cultural heritage designation in 2014. And Tanya Tagaq, who's one of the best-known contemporary Inuit performers, won the Polaris Prize in 2014. She's in the show too, playing Nuliajuk, the Sea Woman.



Corn

A solo throat singer winning the Polaris Prize, in a form that was built as a two-person contest.



Herman

That's the reinvention question in one image. The tradition was two women in a face-off. The globally known version is one woman alone on a stage. Something was lost in the translation, and something new was made.



Corn

And that's the question the whole back half of the prompt is circling. When traditions get revived, is what comes back the same tradition, or something new that borrows the name.



Herman

And there isn't a clean answer. The tattoos come back with the same designs and a different set of meanings. The throat singing comes back as stage performance rather than a game. The mask dance comes back as theater. Each one is doing a double move, recovering something and remaking it at the same time.



Corn

Mask dance, since the show's second season is built around it.



Herman

The Season 2 premiere is literally called "I Wanna Mask Dance With Somebody," and it guest stars Laakkuluk Williamson Bathory, who's a Kalaaleq, a Greenlandic Inuk, as a mask dancer. So the show is bringing the Greenlandic side of the culture into a Nunavut story, which is a nice pan-Inuit move.



Corn

So that's the traditional and the revived. Now the weird specific stuff Hannah asked about. Start with walrus dick baseball, because I have to.



Herman

Walrus dick baseball is the title of the fifth episode of season one. In the show, it's a community fundraiser that turns into a winner-take-all contest.



Corn

And is it real.



Herman

As far as I can tell, no. There's no independent documentation of it as a traditional Inuit game. It appears to be the show's own invention, or a private joke the writers put in to see who would ask.



Corn

So the show invented a game with the most memorable name in television and dared people to google it.



Herman

That's exactly what it looks like. And the fact that it's the fifth episode means people have already invested an hour and a half before the title card shows up.



Corn

Which is a very specific kind of confidence.



Herman

It's the confidence of writers who know their audience is going to be mostly outsiders, and who've decided the outsiders can catch up or not.



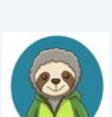
Corn

Bum hopping.



Herman

There's no source that uses the exact term bum hopping. But the closest documented Inuit game is the knuckle hop, and there's a related one called the seal hop. Both are done from a push-up position, hopping forward on your fists or your palms.



Corn

Why.



Herman

It mimics a hunter sneaking up on a seal. You're on the ice, you want to get close without breaking the silhouette a seal would recognize, so you move low and slow and on your hands. The game is a training exercise for actual hunting.



Corn

And the world record.



Herman

Two hundred and seventeen feet. Set by Chris Stipdonk at the Arctic Winter Games this past March.



Corn

Two hundred and seventeen feet on your knuckles.



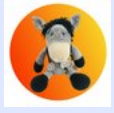
Herman

It's a number that should not be possible to do on a human body and yet people do it, and the record has been creeping up for decades. Which tells you something about how seriously the competitors take it. This isn't a novelty event at a summer camp. It's a sport with training regimens and technique and coaching.



Corn

So the "bum hopping" in the show is probably knuckle hop, renamed for comedy.



Herman

That's the most likely reading. The writers had the real game and they gave it a silly name, or the character describing it doesn't know the real name. Either way the underlying activity is documented.



Corn

Other Arctic sports.



Herman

The Arctic games span a whole range. One-foot high kick, two-foot high kick, Alaskan high kick, kneel jump, ear pull, finger pull, blanket toss, which is nalukataq, and one called the airplane. They grew out of hunting and fishing skills. The high kicks come from signaling to a distant hunter that you've spotted game. The ear pull comes from enduring pain.



Corn

So the games are a catalog of the skills the culture needed.



Herman

They're a physical archive. Each event is a skill that mattered, turned into a competition so it wouldn't be lost. The high kick isn't just for fun. It's a way of keeping the signaling skill alive in a form people will actually practice. The games are how the culture remembers what the body used to need to do.



Corn

And the competitions.



Herman

Arctic Winter Games from 1970, World Eskimo Indian Olympics from 1961. The latter is where the Eskimo name stuck, for the reasons we discussed. And there's a certain irony that the term is preserved in the name of the event that celebrates the culture.



Corn

Bannock.



Herman

Pre-contact it was made from local plants. Post-contact, from flour. And now it's a cultural symbol of community, even though the flour version is entirely a colonial import. Which is another one of those cases where the revival is also a reinvention.



Corn

So the answer to Hannah's question about which references are traditional and which aren't is: almost none are cleanly one or the other.



Herman

Almost nothing in that show is cleanly one or the other. Even the parkas are a hybrid. Even the food is a hybrid. The culture isn't a museum piece, and the show doesn't treat it as one.



Corn

Let's come back to the framing question the prompt actually raises. Hannah says she grew up with the word Eskimo and knows it's outdated. So what's the practical version of that for a listener who's done the same thing.



Herman

The practical version is that the word is not universally offensive, because the Arctic isn't a single community. In Canada and Greenland, use Inuit. In Alaska, the situation is more complicated, and if you're talking about Yupik people specifically, Inuit isn't the right word either.



Corn

Which means there's no single replacement term that works everywhere.



Herman

There isn't. And that's not a wart on the terminology. That's a fact about the situation. The Inuit aren't a nation-state. They're a people spread across four countries with different histories and different relationships to the same words.



Corn

What about the "are they part of the broader Indigenous world" question, since Hannah asked it directly.



Herman

The clean answer is: legally and politically yes, culturally and linguistically distinct. If you're talking about Canadian law, they're Aboriginal, full stop. If you're talking about language families and material cultures, they're a separate branch from the First Nations, and they share a family with the Yupik and the Aleut that the First Nations aren't in.



Corn

So the grouping that makes sense in a courtroom doesn't make sense in an anthropology department.



Herman

Which is not a contradiction. It's two different questions with two different answers.



Corn

And it also explains why the show can have a Cree character who's treated as an outsider inside the Inuit community. That relationship isn't just personal friction. It's a legal category that groups them together and a cultural reality that keeps them apart.



Herman

Kuuk is Indigenous in the same legal sense that Siaja is. And Kuuk is also an outsider in Ice Cove in a way that has nothing to do with the law and everything to do with the specific texture of the place. Both things are true at once, and the show lets both things



Herman (continued)

be true at once.



Corn

Now the harder question underneath all of it, which is the one the show is really about.



Herman

Who gets to decide what counts as Inuit identity when the culture is being revived for audiences that aren't Inuit.



Corn

Because the show hit the top ten on Netflix in twenty-seven countries.



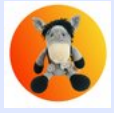
Herman

In twenty-seven countries. So most of the people watching it have no way to evaluate the references. They're getting the culture through the show's chosen framing, and they'll walk away thinking they understand something about Inuit life.



Corn

Which is either representation or flattening, depending on who you ask.



Herman

And the answer is both, at the same time. The show has Inuit writers, Inuit showrunners, an Inuit lead. That's a level of control that Arctic storytelling has not usually had. But the moment it goes to twenty-seven countries, it becomes the reference point for millions of people who will never encounter another Inuit cultural product.



Corn

So the specificity is the defense.



Herman

The specificity is the defense. The show doesn't smooth out the culture for outsiders. It keeps the reference to walrus dick baseball, keeps the knuckle hop, keeps the elder speaking Inuktitut, keeps the tattoos uneven across the generations. The opacity is the argument. If you're confused, that's the show telling you the culture is not for you to fully get in one season.



Corn

Which is a very different posture than the typical Netflix show about an unfamiliar culture, where the outsider character is there to ask the questions the audience is asking.



Herman

There's no tutorial character. There's no cultural Sherpa. You're just dropped in.



Corn

The cost of doing it that way is that some viewers will misread things. The benefit is that the culture isn't performed for the audience.



Herman

And the show seems to have decided the benefit is worth the cost, which is a defensible call if you're the one making the show.



Corn

Alright, I think we've covered the whole prompt, or close to it.



Hilbert

The knuckle hop record is not two hundred and seventeen feet. But I know a man named Pootoogoo who did two hundred and forty and the Arctic Winter Games wouldn't count it.



Corn

You witnessed this.



Hilbert

Yes. At a community event. I would rather not say precisely where. There's a dispute about jurisdiction on the ice that whole month and I'd rather not open it up again.



Corn

So there's a man named Pootoogoo who holds an unofficial knuckle hop record of two hundred and forty feet.



Hilbert

He does. He's dead nearly two decades now. His nephew runs a snow removal business outside Iqaluit. Still uses the same truck.



Corn

Alright.



Hilbert

On walrus dick baseball, I have a correction for the two of you. It is not a joke. It is a real game. I've played it.



Corn

Go on.



Hilbert

The bat is a piece of driftwood wrapped in sealskin at one end for weight. The ball is a walrus vertebra wrapped in sinew. Three bases, arranged in a triangle. The scoring system counts one point for reaching first, two for reaching second, three for reaching third, four for home, and there's a rule about a hit over the far boundary being worth seven points, which no one has ever clarified on paper but everyone enforces.



Corn

Wait, so what does the walrus in the name actually refer to?



Hilbert

The ball. That's the entire business. The vertebra. Somebody in the seventies called it walrus dick and it stuck, and now that's what the game is called. The game itself is older.



Corn

How much older.



Hilbert

Different people will tell you different things. Some say it came from the mainland. Some say it started on the island. I don't take a position.



Corn

Do you have a position.



Hilbert

I have a position that people who didn't grow up playing it shouldn't take a position on the origin story. That's my position.



Corn

Noted.



Hilbert

There was a fundraiser for the community hall in the nineties. The hall had burned down, and the game raised something like eleven thousand dollars to rebuild it. The hall burned down again four years later, but the second time the insurance covered it. So the baseball did its job twice.



Corn

Twice.



Hilbert

The second fire was in the kitchen. Not the baseball's fault, but I'm telling you the lot.



Corn

So the same community hall burned down twice and was rebuilt twice, and the first rebuild was funded by this game.



Hilbert

The first one was. The second one was the insurance. Both times the walrus was named Steve.



Corn

I'm going to need you to say more about that.



Hilbert

Steve was the walrus. Every game had a walrus. I'm not saying there was a live walrus at the game, I'm saying the walrus was a concept, and the concept's name was Steve. Steve had been at every game for something like forty years. Nobody alive remembered the first Steve. That's all there is to say.



Corn

The walrus is a role that's been filled by a single walrus for forty years.



Hilbert

It's a ceremonial position. Yes.



Corn

I want to be clear that you're saying the game is called walrus dick baseball because the ball is a vertebra carved from a walrus whose name was Steve.



Hilbert

The current Steve. The previous Steve was before the game changed formats. There were at least two Steves. Possibly three. The name transferred.



Corn

Alright.



Hilbert

One more correction. I was not the referee of the 1961 game. That's a rumor. I was refereeing in spirit. My uncle was the referee, and I was there in a dream. He told me afterward that I called the game well.



Corn

You refereed a game that happened more than sixty years ago from inside a dream that your uncle had.



Hilbert

He had the dream. I was in it. Those are different things, Corn.



Corn

I stand corrected.



Hilbert

The game was a close one. Steve called it. The walrus has a vote, which I realize I have not mentioned.



Corn

The walrus votes.



Hilbert

On disputed calls. Not every call. Disputed ones. Steve had the final say.



Corn

How did the walrus communicate his ruling.



Hilbert

He flipped. Belly up meant the runner was safe. Belly down meant out. There's a whole vocabulary. It takes years to learn.



Corn

Of course it does.



Hilbert

The last game I played was a fundraiser for the school in a community I would rather not name. The score was tied in the seventh. Steve flipped belly up on a call nobody could read, and the game went the way it went. The other team has not forgiven me. I have not been back.



Corn

You're banned from a community you won't name because of a ruling a ceremonial walrus made.



Hilbert

I'm not banned. I just haven't been invited. There's a difference. Two thousand and eight was the last time. I don't think about it much.



Corn

The walrus is a real ceremonial role, the game is real, and you've lost a friendship over a walrus vote.



Hilbert

I would not call it a friendship. He was my cousin's husband. He still is. We just don't speak.



Corn

How many people are on this game's roster that I'm not going to be able to verify.



Hilbert

Half a village. And I've given you the version that makes me sound reasonable.



Corn

You've given me the version where you refereed a game in a dream sixty years ago and settled a disputed call with a walrus.



Hilbert

Steve made the call. I just relayed it.



Corn

Alright, Hilbert. I think we've got it.



Hilbert

There were two Steves.



Corn

You said possibly three.



Hilbert

There were two. I want to be accurate.



Corn

We're calling it two Steves.



Hilbert

Two that anyone alive remembers. That's the number.



Corn

Good.



Herman

Two Steves.



Hilbert

Two.



Corn

Alright. So where does that leave us on the actual question.



Herman

I think the walrus thing is a perfect illustration of the whole episode. It sounds absurd, and it might be, and if it's real that's the point. There are things in this culture that only start to make sense once you're inside. And Hannah's question was, what does that look like from the outside.



Corn

The answer is: from the outside you hear "walrus dick baseball" and assume it's a joke. From the inside it's a community fundraiser with a ceremonial walrus and a vote and a whole history of who's speaking to whom.



Herman

Which is exactly the way the show treats it. The audience is expected to be the outsider and the show refuses to translate.



Corn

What's the one thing to take from all of this.



Herman

That the Inuit are not a monolith. Four countries, multiple languages, multiple religions, and a thousand years of shared history. Anyone who tells you "the Inuit believe X" or "the Inuit do Y" is almost always talking about one community, or one anthropologist's year of fieldwork, and generalizing from there.



Corn

The specificity is the point. Walrus dick baseball, the knuckle hop, the tattoo generations, the no-yelling finding that turns out to be one community on Baffin Island. The specific things are what make the culture legible, and the moment you flatten them into a universal claim you've lost the thing you were trying to understand.



Herman

The other piece is the revival-in-reinvention tension. Tattoos, throat singing, mask dance, all came back in the last twenty years, and none of them came back exactly as they were. That's not a failure of authenticity. That's how a living culture works.



Corn

If you want more on the Arctic, we've got an older episode on life on the Bering Strait, the Diomede Islands and what it's like to live two miles apart across the international date line. And one on Greenland's coldest inhabited place, which is relevant to the Greenlandic side of everything we've been talking about.



Herman

There's the parenting one from way back, which is where a lot of people first ran into the "Inuit don't yell" idea, and where the nuance we added today belongs next to it.



Corn

The nuance is: Briggs documented one community, and the popular version generalized it.



Herman

Which is a bigger conversation than one episode. But that's the piece to hold onto.



Corn

My Weird Prompts is a human-AI collaboration podcast. Producer Hilbert Flumingtop. The show is on my weird prompts dot com, and if you want to send us your own prompt, it's Telegram, t dot me slash MWP listener bot. Reviews help. We read them.



Herman

We do read them.



Corn

Send us the weird ones. Especially the ones you're not sure we'll understand.



Herman

See you soon.

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