

## GEORGE NOONGWOOK (1949–2023)

George Mangtaquli Noongwook, Yupik Elder from Savoonga, Alaska, passed away on 18 March 2023 (Fig. 1). George was a drummer, singer, and historian of St. Lawrence Island music; an ardent advocate of Yupik and Iñupiaq whaling rights through his decades-long service to the Alaska Eskimo Whaling Commission; a dedicated and insightful scholar of his people and their environment; and devoted to his family and friends.

George was born in Savoonga 23 February 1949 to Joseph (Saamkumii) and Katherine Toolie (Quunglliqan) Noongwook, the eldest of their seven children. Their large and supportive family included many uncles, siblings, cousins, and other relatives from the *Pugughileghmiit* clan. He married Jeannie Alowa (Akimuq) Noongwook. George is survived by his many children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren.

Like most of his generation, he left home to attend a boarding school for his high school years, in George's case at Mt. Edgecumbe in Sitka, Alaska. Characteristically, George recalled positive aspects of that experience, noting that he had never seen so many girls in his life, and that learning to make his bed properly every morning helped set him "on the right path," as he put it. From there, he enrolled at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, but left because he was unhappy with the way that he and other Alaska Native students were treated in the late 1960s. He worked briefly as a loadmaster with an air cargo company. This being the Vietnam Era, however, George was soon drafted into the U.S. Army. After basic training at Fort Lewis, in Washington state, George was posted to Fort Leonard Wood in Missouri, with the 5th Engineer Battalion. He worked in the supply room keeping records and making reports, receiving a promotion for his talent and diligence. The summer heat and insects were not to his liking, however, and he decided the name of the state was appropriately pronounced "misery."

While still in the army in Anchorage, George made his first focused effort to secure his Yupik identity. Despite being raised in a Yupik-speaking family, with St. Lawrence Island Yupik as his mother tongue, he could not write or read in his native language because there was no program with any element of Yupik in Alaska schools at that time. So when George heard that Prof. Michael Krauss (1934–2019), linguist with the University of Alaska Fairbanks, was giving Yupik literacy workshops for adult speakers in Anchorage, he showed up for the class. Prof. Krauss recalled it years later:

I held that literacy workshop in Anchorage for three years: 1971, 1972, 1973, mostly for St. Lawrence islanders who lived in Anchorage. They were the nicest of people, very dedicated. I believe we used some handwritten manual that we made in the 1960s and encouraged them to read. And one day a young man showed up in his military uniform, he was late, and he



FIG. 1. George Noongwook singing and drumming in Clyde River, Nunavut, during a cultural and intellectual exchange involving Indigenous researchers from around the Arctic. George loved sharing his music and culture, especially with other Indigenous peoples. Photo: Henry P. Huntington, May 2017.

looked at us and he said: "Oh, my God, you are reading in Yupik!" He caught the rules like in three minutes and by the end of the hour, he was reading fluently, and I think he spent a whole extra hour after and learned to write fluently too. It took him just two hours to become literate in his native language, a miracle. It was the first time I met George Noongwook and I found him a remarkably gifted man.

(Michael Krauss, interview with Igor Krupnik,  
17 February 2004)

After his stint in the army, George returned to Savoonga and resumed his life as a subsistence hunter, whaler, and a community spokesperson. Here, his father told him that his grandfather Jimmie Toolie and uncle Nathan Noongwook wanted to see him at his father's coffee shop. George was concerned and went to make sure everyone was okay. He was met by a row of singers and drummers and an enthusiastic greeting from Jimmie and Nathan. As George

recalled years later, they explained that they had chosen him to learn the Yupik songs of Savoonga, including the histories of the songs, who composed them and for whom, and more. They said:

We're going to teach you songs of our people that have been passed through generations, all from memory. We know that you have a gift of memory and [you are] someone that can carry on these important stories and be able to continue teaching others the songs once we are gone!

At that time, George knew very little about the musical traditions of St. Lawrence Island. He quickly learned, and said, "The songs were enthralling, and the dances were beautiful. The songs just caught me up, full of laughter and good feeling." Until his last days, George was working with an international team of researchers to transfer his extensive music recordings to durable media and to document some of the history of the songs and the music.

According to George, a group of Yupik singers, drummers, and dancers can be seen as a microcosm of a society in which everyone assumes an equally important role in his or her niche (Fig. 2). He said:

The [high] calibre of [the performances] came from people together—every singer had an image in the whole group—something to give to the group in the way of a voice, a dance, or most importantly the songs that they were producing on their own.

This was George's life-long philosophy. A drummer may not have the best drumming skill or singing voice, but he contributes to the group performance by adding more volume and depth to the music. A dancer may not be the most talented, but the audience may appreciate the humour in her bodily movements and facial expressions. Or someone may not be able to sing or dance well, but their positive attitude and enthusiasm for Yupik dancing can inspire the other performers. George said that the collective effort of all members enables the growth of happiness of the individual and the whole group. People appreciate who they are and are appreciated by others for this. This perspective may also explain why George remained a leader of the Savoonga dancing and drumming group for many decades and was always revered by his teammates.

George's whaling career started when he was 12 years old. At that time, people from Savoonga traveled to Gambell, the other community on St. Lawrence Island, to go whaling. Following the instructions of his great uncle, Homer Apatiki, George joined the crew of Abraham Kaningok (Tapiisak), captained by Tapiisak's younger brother Willard Kaningok (Atleghuq). By the time George returned from the army, Nathan Noongwook, George's uncle, had led Savoonga's effort to resume whaling at the clan's traditional homesite of Pugughileq, near the island's Southwest Cape. George became a lifelong whaler,



FIG. 2. George Noongwook working on a Yupik drum in Savoonga. He noted that drummers have to keep the drum moist, but "If you wet it too much, there's no pizzazz." George was an accomplished drum-maker, and everyone in Savoonga asked him to change the membrane on their personal drums because, as George said, "tuning a drum requires knowledge, skill, and sense, and he is the best!" Photo: Hiroko Ikuta, November 2006.

eventually stepping up as a whaling captain himself before passing that role to his eldest son. Not surprisingly, the Savoonga Whaling Captains Association selected George to be the community's representative to the Alaska Eskimo Whaling Commission (AEWC), which was created in response to the 1977 decision by the International Whaling Commission (IWC) to ban all bowhead whaling because of concern about whale's low population size.

George spent decades on the AEWC, serving variously as its chairman, vice chairman, and in other roles. The initial ban on Aboriginal bowhead whaling had been replaced with a quota, which meant that the Alaska whalers had to battle for the quota's renewal every few years, each time requiring travel to annual IWC meetings held around the world, and often at times that were not convenient to the annual hunting cycle on St. Lawrence Island. At these meetings, many official representatives from former whaling states were hostile to whaling of any kind, certainly to exemptions for Alaska's Aboriginal whalers, making for tense and difficult times. Harry Brower Jr., a Iñupiaq whaler from Utqiaġvik, the AEWC long-term president, and mayor of the North Slope Borough, recalled George's influence:

It was in the time of close kinship amongst our whaling communities, fighting for our God-given right to sustain our way of life. I first met George in a meeting held in Utqiaġvik. The focus of discussions was in regard to a quota renewal, and to develop a strategy to implement [and to seek] an increased quota from the IWC. It took many hours of discussions in generating a multifaceted strategy, not knowing what level of resistance we were going to be situated in within the IWC meetings? The

thoughts of building up our alliances was suggested by George, and the conversations on this matter led to seeking support from our Alaska congressional delegation in Washington D.C. George was very instrumental in the communications for these efforts.

George was a passionate and eloquent advocate for Yupik and Iñupiaq whaling. In 2018, George and his fellow commissioners plus a team of lawyers and scientists traveled to Florianopolis, Brazil, for that year's IWC meeting. Their goal was to create a permanent quota, removing the need to fight the same battle for its renewal over and over. George gave an eloquent speech, citing the common desire of everyone there to provide for their families and communities and to carry on their cultural traditions. The IWC approved the permanent quota, and a major victory for Alaskan whalers was achieved (Fig. 3).

With his intellectual abilities and interests, George inevitably became involved in numerous research projects focused on St. Lawrence Island. He led local efforts to document Indigenous observations of sea ice and weather change on the island that resulted in the book *Sikumengllu Eslamengllu Esghapalleghput, Watching Ice and Weather Our Way* (Oozeva et al., 2004). Another major effort was the documentation of Yupik knowledge about bowhead whales around St. Lawrence Island (Noongwook et al., 2007). In the following years, George took part in two major research programs, one about the Bering Sea (Huntington et al., 2013a, b) and one about the northern Bering and Chukchi Seas (Huntington et al., 2021), as well as many other projects such as the music study mentioned earlier. George approached this work with generosity and good humor. During the project on Indigenous knowledge on bowhead around St. Lawrence Island, a reviewer questioned the idea that a whale would swim along the left side of the whaling boat, opposite the harpooner, to assess whether the crew was worthy of receiving the gift of the whale. The reviewer suggested that the crew simply get a left-handed harpooner. George laughed and said: "If the harpooner was left-handed, the whale would come up on the right side."

George was also an accomplished mentor to younger people engaged in dance, music, whaling, and other cultural activists. He always enjoyed working with scientists (including the three of us) who assisted local people in documenting community history, Indigenous knowledge, climate observations, and cultural/language sustainability. He served as one of the official supervisors of Ikuta's PhD project on Yupik and Iñupiaq dancing at the University of Aberdeen; without his assistance, insight, and patient mentoring, this work would have never succeeded (Ikuta, 2022).

George was also an eloquent writer, deeply in touch with the cultural and spiritual meaning of his actions, as two examples show. In an essay for a workshop on sea ice organized by the U.S. Marine Mammal Commission in 2000, George wrote:



FIG. 3. George Noongwook at the IWC meeting in Florianopolis, Brazil, being congratulated by friends and colleagues who were meeting in Nuuk, Greenland. They missed having George with them but understood the importance of his work at the IWC, just as George enjoyed sharing the joy of the AEWC's success. Photo: Bill Hess, September 2018.

We cannot change nature, our past, and other people for that matter, but we can control our own thoughts and actions and participate in global efforts to cope with these global climate changes. That I think is the most empowering thing we can do as individuals.

(Noongwook, 2000:34)

Contributing an essay on hunting to a book about sea ice (Huntington et al. 2017:583), George wrote:

The camaraderie displayed by hunters forms bonds that are lifelong. The spirit of cooperation and sharing yields success and happiness to you, your family, and your community. The desired nutrition, teamwork, and benefits gained are quite an experience. There is a tremendous amount of respect for each other and for marine mammals, and enjoyment from the fruits of your work that is much desired in life.

George Noongwook will be greatly missed by his family, his community, and those of us fortunate to have known him as a friend, research partner, co-author, and mentor.

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