

Laura Salvini

## **Sheila Watt-Cloutier: the Inuit<sup>i</sup> Way to Environmental Peace.**

When it comes to the definition of peace, most of us would state by instinct that peace is the absence of war. However, peace researchers find quite hard to define this complicated concept by means of one simple assertion.

Moving from the idea of negative peace as the absence of war, Johan Galtung<sup>ii</sup> introduced the notion of positive peace as the absence of structural violence; along the same lines, Birgit Brock-Utne<sup>iii</sup> increased the scope of the latter with further distinctions between “organized physical violence” and “unorganized physical violence”, and also between “organized structural violence” and “unorganized structural violence”. Brock-Utne argues that a society cannot be considered peaceful when violence exists not only on a systematic level, but also on a private one, for instance against women or children within their own families.

More recently, Christina Schäffner and Anita Wenden<sup>iv</sup> suggested that, together with the previous definitions, the very word “peace” needed to be considered in all its different uses. Fields of investigation could be, for example, the annual press releases of the Nobel Peace Prize Committees, major cultural traditions, and peace movements.

I share the conviction that the three areas mentioned above may work as fundamental indicators of possible shifts in the common perception of the idea of peace. This aspect deserves emphasizing since so many people are often unaware that, particularly in a globalized world, to live in a peaceful society means to gain control simultaneously on a range of different issues, from equality to environment, from gender fairness to poverty.

This presentation intends to verify such assumptions. It has the double purpose of addressing some of the shifts that, in my opinion, are relevant to framing the notion of peace in our time, and of tracing them in the writings and speeches of Inuk environmental activist Sheila Watt-Cloutier<sup>v</sup>, among the Nobel Peace Prize nominees for 2007. I will conclude then with some considerations on the choice of words used by Watt-Cloutier and a group of Inuit to describe their observations on climate change.

## **Environment and peace**

Since 1901, every year the Nobel Peace Prize Committee has appointed one or more recipients of the award to promote, in Alfred Nobel's words, "the most or the best work for fraternity between nations, for the abolition or reduction of standing armies and for the holding and promotion of peace congresses"<sup>vi</sup>. At first, the Committee members chose personalities involved in humanitarian relief (Red Cross), disarmament, international arbitration and conciliation<sup>vii</sup>. In other words, subjects who were able to achieve excellent results in supporting victims of conflicts, preventing or ending wars.

In my view, by awarding the Quakers in 1947<sup>viii</sup>, the Nobel Committee showed for the first time a specific interest in the struggle against intolerance and social injustice, a remarkable trait of this religious community that has always rejected violence in all its forms. Over the years, besides the original categories of conflict resolution and weapon control, the Nobel Peace Prize has been awarded for work in a wider range of fields, including human rights, food supply, health issues, ethno-cultural reconciliation, poverty and, in 2004 with laureate Wangari Maathai, sustainable development.

In the press release awarding Maathai, the Nobel Committee affirmed that "[p]eace on earth depends on our ability to secure our living environment"<sup>ix</sup>, underlining how Maathai's holistic approach, which links together democracy, economy, human rights, and environment, allows a local action to become relevant on a global level. I agree that Maathai's work has triggered off a call for the recognition of a global interdependence. But I also believe that it has encouraged researchers, politicians and common people alike to think and act outside their geographical and cultural borders. This is the reason why the cry of the Tuvaluans<sup>x</sup>, who are afraid of being evacuated in the near future from their narrow island in the rising waters of the Pacific, cannot remain unheard. For the same reason, the claims of the Inuit, who see the ice cap melting under their feet, deserve attention from the powerful governments over the globe. In both cases the inhabitants of those supposedly remote areas of the planet are transforming their local worries into a global warning. In particular, the 155-thousand Inuit of the Arctic regions (Alaska, Canada, Greenland and Russian Far East) have been taking the spotlight on climate change, undergoing actions with the

support of the Inuit Circumpolar Conference (ICC), and under the vigorous leadership of its former chair, Sheila Watt-Cloutier.

### **The woman who wants to remain cold**

Watt-Cloutier was born in Kuujuaq, a small Inuit village in northern Quebec, and lives now in Iqaluit, the capital of the new Canadian territory of Nunavut. As a child she was brought up in a traditional way, traveling near her Arctic home by dog team. In a radio interview, she described those first ten years of her life as a formative period of bonding “with the ice, snow and cold”, during which she established ties with her family and community, and understood that to her “the bounty from the ice and snow represented life and nurturance in the best of ways.”<sup>xi</sup>

Today, she jets across the world, eschews talking of her list of prestigious awards, uses the skills she learnt from her native hunting culture to challenge the bureaucracy of the powerful nations, the skepticism of the economic lobbies worldwide, and to advocate the right of the Inuit for protection from what the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon called “one of the most serious and pressing challenges of our time” — climate change<sup>xii</sup>.

I have recently interviewed Watt-Cloutier in Rome<sup>xiii</sup>. She explained that the passing on of traditional knowledge and wisdom is a strong foundation for the young generations, because “all of those skills of sound judgment, creativity, courage, patience are not only requirements to survive the land they are transferable in the modern world”. As a result, she argued that traveling around the world to speak about climate change in her suit and brief-case outfit is like preparing for the hunt with furs and harpoons. She performs it as a strategic act, in which she metaphorically checks the horizon and try to be focused, “so [I] become the hunter,” she told me, “and — even as a woman — [I] carry that wherever [I] go.”

In one of her speeches as ICC chair, Watt-Cloutier gave an emblematic image to enforce her request for the banning of persistent organic pollutants (POPs); “we wish to speak out on behalf of the land,” she said, “that has sustained us for hundreds of generations. We are the land and the land is us. We cannot stand by, waiting for slow moving governments to step in and make everything right, rather we must try to effect what change we can.” In addition to the idea of the “connectivity” between human beings and the land addressed to an international audience, Watt-Cloutier urges her

Inuit audience to take action. When she speaks about traditional skills “transferable into the modern world”, she means that Inuit young generations must find their capacity to react and stop relying on too many forms of dependence like addiction to drugs, alcohol, welfare or unemployment. And she concluded her speech by stressing the need to overcome the self-perception of being a victim, who inhabits a peripheral zone. She states that: “If we can help people to see that a poisoned Inuk child, a poisoned Arctic and a poisoned planet are one in the same, then we will have effected a shift in peoples awareness that will result without doubt in positive change.”<sup>xiv</sup> She advocates a strong connection between the local and the global.

I’ve already mentioned that the above quotations are from a speech about POPs and their consequences on health. A dramatic topic, particularly, in the case of Inuit women that by storing high level of toxins in their blood pass the poisons to their children through the placenta and breast milk. The speech calls for positive peace too, because, as Brock-Utne argues, when the life span is shortened by effect of pollution, we suffer a state of “organized structural violence”.

However, a pacified society cannot thrive by denying the right to positive peace of other peoples. Therefore the campaign against POPs was to deal with the negative side effects that their banning could have generated for the population of tropical countries that, for instance, needs protection from malaria. Watt-Cloutier addressed this problem in a speech she gave at the University of Aberdeen, in which she stated that ICC “cannot take a ‘North versus South’ approach in these negotiations”. She insisted on the necessity of strong co-operation on an equal base with the indigenous peoples of tropical countries and with the scientific community worldwide.<sup>xv</sup>

After the signature in May 2001 of the “Stockholm Convention on POPs”,<sup>xvi</sup> which marked an important step in the participation of the indigenous peoples of the Arctic regions to the international debate on pollution, public health and human rights, Watt-Cloutier launched a campaign against climate change. In 2002, during an UN conference on sustainable development, Watt-Cloutier solicited her audience to “give climate change in the North a human face—an Inuk patiently waiting for a seal to surface on the sea ice or flow edge; a Gwich’in hunter pursuing caribou near the Old Crow river; or a Nenets family herding reindeer on the Yamal Peninsula.”<sup>xvii</sup>

Although this request may seem to touch upon a minor issue, it may help create a feeling of empathy in people living in other parts of the world. It’s a fact,

almost a commonplace, that the Arctic region is normally perceived as wilderness. As Watt-Cloutier told me during the interview:

there is no wilderness, there is no even a name for wilderness in our language; it's just going out in the land, going camping around our land, there's not separation between us and nature [...] when we go to these meetings and everything is about technology, carbon sinks, emission trading, when there's no human face to any of this and the urgency of the matter is not there; people don't connect.

In this way the issue of global warming takes up a human face. Consequently, the whole matter shifts from the environmental agenda into the wider arena of human rights, thus creating a complex interaction between pollution and environment, health and food web, culture and human rights, and ultimately positive peace. The Inuit, who belong to a culture originated from a frozen land, claim for themselves the “human right to be cold.”<sup>xviii</sup>

### **Technology embedded in words**

At the end of 2005, Watt-Cloutier, “with the support of the ICC and on behalf of all Inuit of the Arctic regions of USA and Canada” submitted a 167-page petition to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights in Washington, D.C., “seeking relief from violations resulting from global warming caused by acts and omissions of the United States.”<sup>xix</sup> This is the last document I’d like to consider in my paper.

I’ll begin by examining its content. Ten chapters structure the text. Some of them (I; II; III; VIII; X) are mainly concerned with legal aspects in formal terms like summary, jurisdiction, names of the petitioners, and so on. Chapter V analyses the crimes “for which the United States are responsible”, with reference to the 1948 American Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man. But from a cultural point of view the most interesting section is Chapter IV.

Since I was a child I have heard that indigenous peoples of the Polar Regions use many different words to describe what we call simply “snow” or “ice”. Even Umberto Eco mentions the four possible translations in the Eskimo culture of the word “neve”<sup>xx</sup> when he explains the meaning of “unità culturale”<sup>xxi</sup>. However, neither our common opinion on the matter, nor Eco go beyond mere comments.

Is the richness of Eskimo-Aleut languages truly unique? First of all, such a statement should be proved by a sort of taxonomic process in order to demonstrate

that the difference between these languages and, for instance, English, really exists. Besides, many linguists would object that due to morphological differences<sup>xxii</sup> a comparison of this kind does not prove anything.

What I would like to highlight in Chapter IV is not the vocabulary, rather the quality of the descriptions on climate change in the petition document given by the 62 members of the Inuit community. Hunters, women and elders from Canada and Alaska formed the group of petitioners. In Watt-Cloutier's words this booklet is "a thick document, a very powerful piece of a legal assertion that weaves together a remarkable, incredible, indigenous wisdom of our hunters and their observations." Their remarks based on traditional knowledge are placed side by side with data, graphics and statistic charts by official entities. This binary structure is implied at the beginning of the chapter in a long quotation that ends as follows: "Inuit recognize the importance of maintaining the oral tradition as a part of our culture and way of learning. At the same time we realize that there are other ways to understand the past through activities such as archeology and the study of historical documents. Both ways of knowing must now be used by Inuit"<sup>xxiii</sup> It sounds like a polite invitation to people of different backgrounds, it's like asking: why don't we share information on a mutual base in the name of common well-being?

The language used by the Inuit in their descriptions stems from what they call: "Inuit Qaujijamajatuqangit, (IQ)", which translated in English reads "Traditional Ecological Knowledge, (TEK). It resembles more the accuracy of detailed technical jargon, than the imagery of storytelling. A hunter cannot misread the land; to translate his habitat even once into an incorrect action could cost him his life. For instance, "pukaq" is the snow at the bottom layer and "aqilluqaq" describes the more recent snow coverage. Expert hunters are able to detect any shift in the proportions between the two different snow layers when they test them for igloo building, or when they judge the performances of their sled dogs. TEK, this technology of observation and practice, expresses itself in words, not in numbers."<sup>xxiv</sup>

Watt-Cloutier told me that she considered the petition document as a gift to the government of the United States. When she went to submit it in Washington, D.C., all the media were there, waiting for what they called their "David versus Goliath's confrontation". On the contrary, she meant it as a testimony of "a place of peace, a place of strength and assertiveness."

With the creation of a peaceful movement that allowed the Inuit to enter the

international debate on vital issues, Watt-Cloutier succeeded in “putting a human face” on climate change. But I’d like to point out that in the petition document the approach has the accuracy of the technical discourse. In doing this, Watt-Cloutier showed she could master another skill, which she probably learnt when she worked for the Ungava Hospital as an Inuktitut translator and linguistic mediator, the skill – and the talent – of reconciling different systems of thoughts without demeaning either. After all, mediation is constitutive of peace.

---

## Notes

<sup>i</sup> The Inuit of the Arctic are the native people who live in the Arctic North that is Canada, Alaska, Greenland and the Russian Far East. Inuit means “people” in the Inuktitut language, the singular form of the noun is “Inuk”. They have lived for ten thousand years in one of the coldest area of the planet and are now more than 155,000 individuals. Traditionally they lived in small groups or bands, but in recent time they settled in small towns. In 1999 a separate territory was created in the North Western Canada, this territory is named Nunavut.

<sup>ii</sup> Galtung, Johan, “Editorial”, *Journal of Peace Research*, vol.1, n°1, 1964, pp. 1-4.

———, “Violence, Peace and Peace Research”, *Journal of Peace Research*, vol.6, n°3, 1969, pp. 167-191.

<sup>iii</sup> See: Broke-Utne, Birgit, *Feminist Perspectives on Peace and Peace Education*, New York, Pergamon Press, 1989.

<sup>iv</sup> See: Schäffner, Christina and Anita Wenden (editors), *Language and Peace* (1995), Abingdon, OX, and New York: Routledge, 2004, pp. 4-11.

<sup>v</sup> For her work as environmentalist Watt-Cloutier won many international awards, including the Sophie Prize (2005), the Order of Canada (2006), the Mahbub ul Haq Human Development Award (2007)

<sup>vi</sup> Nobelprize.org, “Excerpt from the Will of Alfred Nobel”

[http://nobelprize.org/alfred\\_nobel/will/short\\_testamente.html](http://nobelprize.org/alfred_nobel/will/short_testamente.html) (October, 2007).

<sup>vii</sup> See: Schäffner, Christina and Anita Wenden (editors), *Language and Peace* (1995), Abingdon, OX, and New York: Routledge, 2004, pp. 4-11.

<sup>viii</sup> In 1947 the Nobel Committee awarded the British Friends Service Council and the American Friends Service Committee, both linked with the Quakers, turning down Mahatma Gandhi, who never won the Prize.

<sup>ix</sup> Nobelprize.org, [http://nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/peace/laureates/2004/press.html](http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/2004/press.html) (October, 2007).

<sup>x</sup> See: Jonathan Adams, “Rising sea levels threaten small Pacific island nations, in *International Herald Tribune*, May 3, 2007.

<sup>xi</sup> CBC.ca, “This I Believe”,

[http://www.cbc.ca/thisibelieve/essays/may23\\_Sheila\\_Watt-Cloutier.html](http://www.cbc.ca/thisibelieve/essays/may23_Sheila_Watt-Cloutier.html) (October, 2007).

<sup>xii</sup> Ban Ki-moon made this statement while appointing Watt-Cloutier with the Mahbub Ul Haq Award,

[http://www.un.org/apps/news/infocus/sgspeeches/statments\\_full.asp?statID=94](http://www.un.org/apps/news/infocus/sgspeeches/statments_full.asp?statID=94) (October, 2007).

<sup>xiii</sup> I interviewed Watt-Cloutier in August 2006, while she was visiting Italy with a mutual friend. Forthcoming excerpts in Acoma.

- 
- <sup>xiv</sup> Plenary Intervention in Montreal, Canada, at The First Meeting of The Inter-Governmental Negotiating Committee Toward a Global Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants, June 29, 1998.  
[http://www.inuitcircumpolar.com/index.php?auto\\_slide=&ID=110&Lang=En&Parent\\_ID=&current\\_slide\\_num=](http://www.inuitcircumpolar.com/index.php?auto_slide=&ID=110&Lang=En&Parent_ID=&current_slide_num=) (October, 2007).
- <sup>xv</sup> Keynote Address to the 12th Inuit Studies Conference at The University of Aberdeen, Scotland, August 23, 2000,  
[http://www.inuitcircumpolar.com/index.php?auto\\_slide=&ID=102&Lang=En&Parent\\_ID=&current\\_slide\\_num=](http://www.inuitcircumpolar.com/index.php?auto_slide=&ID=102&Lang=En&Parent_ID=&current_slide_num=) (October, 2007).
- <sup>xvi</sup> See: The Official Stockholm Convention Website at <http://www.pops.int> (October, 2007).
- <sup>xvii</sup> Arctic Connections: Local/Global Linkages for Sustainable Development, United Nations, New York City, February 6, 2002,  
[http://www.inuitcircumpolar.com/index.php?auto\\_slide=&ID=90&Lang=En&Parent\\_ID=&current\\_slide\\_num=](http://www.inuitcircumpolar.com/index.php?auto_slide=&ID=90&Lang=En&Parent_ID=&current_slide_num=) (October, 2007).
- <sup>xviii</sup> ADM Forum on Globalization, Identity and Citizenship, Ottawa, Ontario, October 27, 2004,  
[http://www.inuitcircumpolar.com/index.php?auto\\_slide=&ID=265&Lang=En&Parent\\_ID=&current\\_slide\\_num](http://www.inuitcircumpolar.com/index.php?auto_slide=&ID=265&Lang=En&Parent_ID=&current_slide_num) (October, 2007).
- <sup>xix</sup> It is possible to download the petition from the ICC website at:  
<http://inuitcircumpolar.com/files/uploads/icc-files/FINALPetitionICC.pdf> (October, 2007).  
The petition was submitted on December 7, 2005. The commission rejected it, but later decided to hold a general hearing to investigate the relationship between climate change and human rights. The hearing was held on March 1, 2007. See the invitation at:  
[http://www.earthjustice.org/library/legal\\_docs/inter-american-commission-on-human-rights-inuit-invite.pdf](http://www.earthjustice.org/library/legal_docs/inter-american-commission-on-human-rights-inuit-invite.pdf) (October, 2007).  
Watt-Cloutier's speech at the hearing is available at:  
<http://www.sophieprize.org/noop/page.php?p=Articles/220.html&print=1> (October, 2007).
- <sup>xx</sup> Italian for "snow".
- <sup>xxi</sup> Umberto Eco, p.99. Of course, before Eco, Franz Boas wrote about the four different words for "snow" in *The Handbook of North American Indians* (1911).
- <sup>xxii</sup> Eskimo-Aleut languages are polysynthetic, which means that most of their words are translated in our languages into long sentences. This aspect makes comparison very difficult.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> From: *Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, Cultural Origins*, <http://www.itk.ca/5000-year-heritage/cultural-origin.php> (October, 2007).
- <sup>xxiv</sup> A documented demonstration of TEK's reliability is the "bowhead whale count of 1977". US government scientists made an estimation of the whale population. Their figures were very low; the Iñupiat hunters were able to demonstrate that those figures were wrong using their TEK. See: Petition, p. 20.