information

Inuit

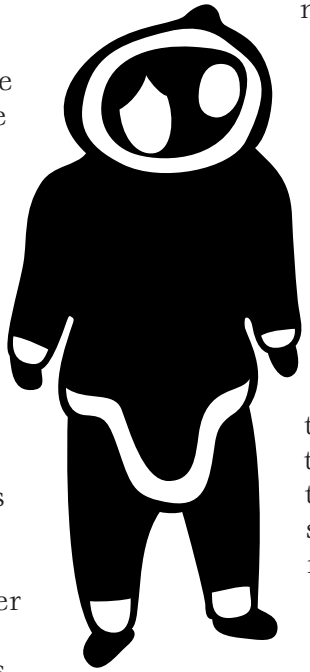
March 2000

For many centuries, outsiders called Inuit "Eskimos." Inuit no longer find this term acceptable. They prefer the name by which they have always known themselves – Inuit, which means "the people" in their own language, Inuktitut.

Inuit inhabit vast areas of Nunavut, the Northwest Territories, the coast of northern Labrador and about 25 percent of Northern Quebec. Traditionally, they have lived above the treeline in the area bordered by Alaska in the west, the Labrador coast in the east, the southern tip of Hudson Bay in the south and the High Arctic Islands in the north.

About 55,700 Inuit live in 53 communities across the North. The Inuit population has grown rapidly over the past few decades. According to Statistics Canada, if present trends continue, there will be about 84,600 Inuit in the North by 2016.

Inuit are one of the three Aboriginal peoples in Canada, as defined by the Canadian Constitution. The other two Aboriginal peoples are First Nations and Métis people.



A culture rooted in the land

Inuit origins in Canada date back at least 4,000 years. Their culture is deeply rooted in the vast land they inhabit. For thousands of years, Inuit closely observed the climate, landscapes, seascapes and ecological systems of their vast homeland. Through this intimate knowledge of the land and its life forms, Inuit developed skills and technology uniquely adapted to one of the harshest and most demanding environments on earth.

Inuit treated human beings, the land, animals and plants with equal respect. Today, they continue to try to maintain this harmonious relationship. They try to use the resources of land and sea wisely to preserve them for future generations.

Strict hunting traditions and rules help maintain this balance. Inuit in Labrador, for example, forbid the killing of any animal in its mating season.

Before the creation of permanent settlements in the 1940s and '50s, Inuit moved with the seasons. They established summer and winter camps to which they returned each year. These seasonal camps enabled Inuit to use the resources of land and sea at the times of the year they were most abundant.

Traditional knowledge about Inuit history, and the land, plants and wildlife, has been passed down through the generations. The family is the centre of Inuit culture, and co-operation and sharing are basic principles in Inuit society. Inuit share the food they have hunted, and everyone does his or her part to help those in need.

Inuit culture has been exposed to many outside influences over the past century. Nevertheless, Inuit have managed to hold on to their values and culture. Inuktitut is still spoken in all Inuit communities. It is also the principal language used in radio and television productions originating in the North, and it is in the school curriculum.

Many Inuit communities continue to practise traditional Inuit dance and song, including the drum dance and throat singing. Oral tradition and storytelling are still very much alive in Inuit culture, with tales passed down over the centuries. These stories are often about powerful spirits that inhabit the land and sea. They have been a continuing source of inspiration for Inuit artists whose prints and sculptures are prized by collectors and art galleries around the world.

The contact period

The first regular contact between Inuit and Europeans began in the mid-1700s when European whalers arrived in the Arctic. By the late 1800s the whaling industry had started to decline and it was replaced by the fur trade. In the decades that followed, an economic relationship based on fur trading developed between Inuit and Europeans.

Apart from encounters with fur traders and some explorers, Inuit had very little contact with the rest of Canada until the 1940s. By then, the Canadian government had begun to establish its presence in the Arctic.

The government encouraged Inuit to live in permanent settlements, instead of their seasonal camps. These settlements were soon supported by Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) detachments, health and social services, and a housing program.

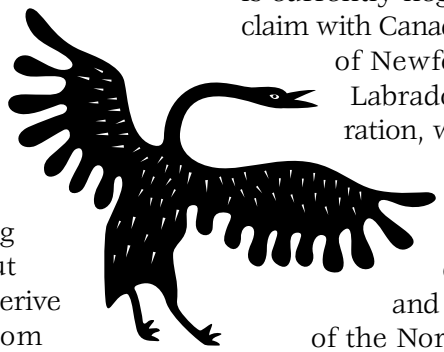
In the 1960s, Inuit began to form marketing co-operatives to help sell local products, including art prints and carvings that were to become world-famous. By the 1970s, the new centralized settlements had become a permanent feature of Inuit life, with new schools and improved medical facilities. Regular air travel and telecommunications helped link the settlements to each other and the rest of the world.

Inuit communities are governed by elected municipal councils. Supporting these councils are committees that deal with hunting, fishing and trapping, and health and education. Inuit schools today offer a modern educational system that incorporates cultural teachings, including Inuktitut language teaching.

The Inuit economy today

Today, Inuit work in all sectors of the economy, including mining, oil and gas, construction, government and administrative services. Many Inuit still supplement their income through hunting.

Tourism is a growing industry in the Inuit economy. Inuit guides take tourists on dogsled and hunting expeditions, and work with outfitting organizations. About 30 percent of Inuit derive part-time income from their sculpture, carving and print making.



The settlement of land claims in the Northwest Territories and Northern Quebec has given Inuit money and a framework to develop and expand economic development activities. New emerging businesses include real estate, tourism, airlines and offshore fisheries.

Land claims and Aboriginal rights

Since the mid-1970s, Inuit have negotiated several comprehensive land claims with the federal government, the Government of the Northwest Territories and the Province of Quebec. These include the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement, signed in 1975, the Inuvialuit Final Agreement, signed in 1984 with the Inuit located in the Western Arctic, and the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement, reached in 1993. Each of these agreements meets the needs of the specific region. In all cases, the settlement package includes financial compensation, land rights, hunting rights and economic development opportunities. The Nunavut Land Claims Agreement also committed the federal government to the division of the Northwest Territories and the creation of the territory of Nunavut on April 1, 1999.

The Labrador Inuit Association is currently negotiating its land claim with Canada and the Province of Newfoundland and Labrador. Makivik Corporation, which represents Inuit of Northern Quebec, is negotiating its offshore claim with Canada and the Government of the Northwest Territories.

Inuit national and international organizations

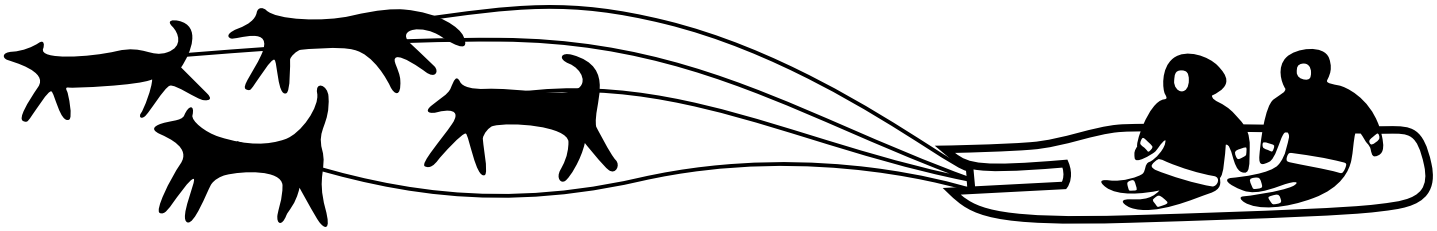
Until the 1970s, Inuit had no regional or national organizations to represent them at the political level. However, in the early 1970s, a group of new leaders emerged. They founded the Inuit Tapirisat of Canada (ITC) in 1971. The ITC leaders lobbied for changes to policies affecting Inuit and their role in Canada. As a result of their efforts, the federal government provided long-term funding to help them establish national and regional Inuit organizations. Using this funding, Inuit organizations focused on issues like self-government, constitutional recognition of Aboriginal rights, environmental issues and land claims.

The Inuit Broadcasting Corporation is the national organization in charge of Inuit broadcast services. Through Television Northern Canada, it broadcasts Inuit television programs across Nunavut, the

NWT, Northern Quebec and Labrador, as well as the Yukon Territory.

In addition to national and regional Inuit organizations, Inuit in Canada work to support Inuit cultural groups that cross international boundaries. In 1977 the Inuit Circumpolar Conference (ICC) was created to represent the interests of Inuit in Canada, Greenland, Chukota (Russia) and Alaska. The ICC works to strengthen unity between Inuit in these regions and promotes sustainable development and Inuit rights and interests at the international level.

The Conference also gives Inuit in Canada the opportunity to participate in economic development projects and joint ventures across the circumpolar region, and with Indigenous peoples in other parts of the world.



DEFINITIONS

Aboriginal rights: Rights that some Aboriginal peoples of Canada hold as a result of their ancestors' longstanding use and occupancy of the land. The rights of certain Aboriginal peoples to hunt, trap and fish on ancestral lands are examples of Aboriginal rights. Aboriginal rights will vary from group to group depending on the customs, practices and traditions that have formed part of their distinctive cultures.

Inuvialuit: Inuit who live in the western Arctic.

Land claims: In 1973, the federal government recognized two broad classes of claims – comprehensive and specific. ***Comprehensive claims*** are based on the recognition that there are continuing Aboriginal rights to lands and natural resources. These kinds of claims come up in those parts of Canada where Aboriginal title has not previously been dealt with by treaty and other legal means. The claims are called "comprehensive" because of their wide scope. They include such things as land title, fishing and trapping rights and financial compensation. ***Specific claims*** deal with specific grievances that First Nations may have regarding the fulfilment of treaties. Specific claims also cover grievances relating to the administration of First Nations lands and assets under the *Indian Act*.

Nunavut: The territory that was created in the Canadian North on April 1, 1999 when the former Northwest Territories was divided in two. Nunavut means "our land" in Inuktitut. Inuit, whose ancestors inhabited these lands for thousands of years, make up 85 percent of the population of Nunavut. The territory has its own public government.

Publications and Public Enquiries

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QS-6119-014-EE-A2