

The North, the Inuit and Nunavut

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Where is North?

For South Americans North is Mexico, the United States and Canada. For most Americans, Alaska and the entire nation of Canada are North. Even for the majority of Canadians, 75% of whom live within a 150-mile wide band along the Canada-U.S. border, North refers to all of Canada outside of that ribbon. Politically, the North in Canada is above the 60th parallel where the provincial-territorial border lies and includes the Yukon, the Northwest Territories and the new territory of Nunavut. Geographically, North could refer to what lies above the Arctic Circle or 66° latitude. For the Inuit North is what lies above the tree line. In other words, there is no strict definition for North. North depends on one's vantage point.

What is North?

Perhaps more interesting than where North lies, is what North means in the imagination of those who are "outsiders" to the region. In most major Canadian cities, looking North means imagining little or no civilization – no roads, no railways, no cities, and no shopping malls – between oneself and the North Pole. North is a spiritual place where one can be alone with nature. It is a reprieve, if only in the imagination, from civilization and the angst of modern life. The North is truly the only place left on earth that is not conquered and due to a harsh climate and difficulty of access will never be settled to the same degree as other regions. It is a place where survival will always be dependent on skill. For this reason the North has played a huge role in Canadian art, literature, and music – it is a key part of the Canadian imagination and psyche. However, the North is also a real place and homeland to tens of thousands of people.

The northern people

Most commonly the North refers to Canada's three territories. These comprise 40% of the total land mass of the country yet are home to only 1% or 100,000 of Canada's 30 million people. Aboriginals and non-aboriginals almost equally represent the residents of the territories. The Yukon is primarily non-aboriginal – 24,000 of 31,000 residents are non-aboriginal. Of the 44,000 residents in the Northwest Territories just over half are aboriginal. And, in Nunavut, over 80% of the 22,000 residents are Inuit.

Aboriginal people have lived in North America, including Canada's North, for thousands of years. There are two original Native groups that came to the North: the Athapaskan people came to the Yukon and Mackenzie River Valley between 12,000 and 24,000 years ago and the Inuit arrived about 4,000 years ago both from Asia and via a land bridge over the Bering Sea. These two main aboriginal groups are separated geographically by the tree line. Traditional Dene land is in the Boreal forest and the Inuit homeland is above tree line in the Barrens.

The Boreal Forest is made up of Spruce trees and muskeg and runs from Alaska to Newfoundland just south of the tree line. The tree line itself is a couple of miles in width separating the two regions. In the Barrens – fully 20% of Canada's land mass – there is a permanent layer of frozen earth just below the surface called permafrost that restricts the growth of trees holds water like a sponge during the summer months.

Inuit in the Circumpolar North and in Canada

Inuit means “the people” in Inuktitut, the Inuit language. There are only about 150,000 Inuit worldwide living in the circumpolar regions of just four countries. Greenland has the largest population, or 55,000 Katladlit; northern Alaska is home to 50,000 Innupiat; just over 40,000 Inuit live in Canada and; approximately 5,000 Yuit or Yup’ik reside in western Alaska and Siberia.

The Inuit in Canada are represented in every province and territory. Nunavut, the new Inuit homeland, comprises almost half of the entire Inuit population with Nunavik in North Québec being home to over 8,000 Inuit. Even Prince Edward Island has a small Inuit population, the smallest in all of Canada with just 15 residents.

The Inuit in Canada are divided into eight major tribal or cultural groups and six political groups whose boundaries roughly follow those of the cultural groups. The political regions enable the negotiation of land claims and self-determination to suit the needs of each area.

Inuit history

The Inuit have lived in Canada’s north for 4,000 years though not as a homogeneous group. Like other aboriginal peoples, they came to North America via the Bering Straight land bridge from Asia. However, while Indians migrated down the West Coast and east across the country, the Inuit stayed in the North migrating to the eastern Arctic and as far as Greenland.

There are five basic periods in Inuit history:

- 1) Pre-Dorset - approximately 3,000 to 1,000 B.C.E.
- 2) Dorset - 1,000 B.C.E. to 1,000 A.C.E.
- 3) Thule - 1,000 to 1,600
- 4) Historic - 1,600 to the mid-20th century
- 5) Contemporary - mid-20th century to the present

The Inuit culture as we know it today evolved from the Thule people whom the Inuit refer to as their ancestors. The Pre-Dorset and Dorset peoples, while Inuit, were different culturally from the Thule and were invaded and displaced by the new migration. The Thule travelled across the north to Greenland bringing with them a new language and culture that included dog teams, *umiak* boats, and hunting implements that allowed for whale hunting.

About 1,600 the Thule culture began to decline due to the change in climatic conditions and the increased diseases brought by Europeans or *kablunait* (“men with heavy eyebrows”) marking the beginning of Inuit culture as we know it today. As the temperatures cooled the Inuit began to build houses from snow rather than using skins. By about 1,000 A.C.E. dogs were introduced and used to pull sleds and from the earliest times kayaks provided water travel. The Inuit traditionally were a nomadic people. They moved about with the seasons and followed the food supply. In the fall they moved inland in search of the cariboo and in the spring they hunted seal along the coast. It wasn’t until the late 1500s that the Inuit came into contact with Europeans. Initial European impact on the Inuit was minimal — most newcomers were explorers, fur traders, or whalers who stayed in the country for a limited time. The Inuit culture wasn’t impacted in a significant way until the 20th century.

The Historic Period marks the advent of European influence in the North until the actual colonization of the North in the 20th century. For over 400 years – since Sir Martin Forbisher initiated the search for the Northwest Passage in 1576 – the Inuit, and other First Nations people in the North have had to negotiate relations with Europeans. Initially European impact on the Inuit was minimal — most newcomers were explorers, fur traders, or whalers who stayed in the country for a limited time not settling as they did in the south.

As a result, the Inuit were able to successfully incorporate European language, goods, religion and values into their culture without radical change. In fact, Inuit culture wasn't impacted in a significant way until the mid-20th century.

Though the search for the Northwest Passage brought a steady stream of Europeans and Americans into the Arctic waters, the explorers had minimal contact with the Inuit.

The Inuit and European explorers to the North

The search for the Northwest Passage plays a huge role in Canadian, and even American, history. From the late 1500s until the early 1900s much of the land was explored and mapped by Europeans looking for a shorter route to Asia. The first to venture into the northern waters was Martin Frobisher in the 1570s. Frobisher, thinking there was gold in the Bay, travelled up the Bay as far as possible. Frobisher was the first European to come into contact with the Inuit and did not fair well in his relations. He took four Inuit back to England with him where they all died. The Inuit's first impression of the Europeans was not a good one. Recently Frobisher Bay, the town, was renamed Iqaluit (pronounced "ee-kal-a-wheat"). It has been voted the capital of Nunavut. There are just over 4,000 people living in Iqaluit. During World War II the U.S. air force built an air strip at Iqaluit to transport war materials to Europe.

One of the most interesting voyages is that of John Franklin who sailed into Lancaster Sound in 1845. (There were many expeditions between the time of Frobisher and Franklin. Davis Strait is named after John Davis who sailed into Cumberland Sound on the east coast of Baffin Island in 1585; Hudson's Bay was explored by Henry Hudson in 1610; William Baffin mapped the coast of Baffin Island in the early 1600s; and William Parry, after which the Parry Islands and Parry Channel are named, was the first European to winter over in the North in the early 1800s.) But John Franklin's expedition is one that has had a lasting impact on the mythology of the North.

Franklin never returned from his effort to find the Northwest Passage. Franklin sailed into Lancaster sound and into oblivion — he was never heard from again. His disappearance started a new surge in exploration in an attempt to find his ship and crew. The Franklin expedition is part of northern mythology as it took over one hundred years to find the bodies all with the assistance of the Inuit. The ships became ice bound and it is assumed that Franklin's crew stayed with the ships for a year and a half until they gave up and attempted to trek to food and safety. All 105 crew members died. When Franklin didn't return to England, his wife sent out a series of search parties. Even American search parties came into the area. As early as the 1850s skeletal remains were found on King William Island. Have the students locate King William Island. It is just off the north shore of what will be Nunavut. An expedition in the 1850s actually found a written record of the disaster, the only one ever located. Though remains have been found throughout the 150 year search it wasn't until the 1980s and 1990s that entire bodies were found preserved in the

permafrost. When the corpses were studied scientists realized that the men had died of poisoning from the lead that was used to solder the food tins. They also determined that the men had engaged in cannibalism to stay alive. Because of the length of time it took to locate the men and to figure out what had been their fate, stories about the expedition have been an active part of the mythology of what will be Nunavut.

After so many attempts and tragedy, the Northwest Passage was finally navigated by a Norwegian named Roald Amundsen and his crew in 1906. More than 300 years since Frobisher first began the search! Have the students trace the Northwest Passage. Starting just north of Baffin Island in Lancaster Sound have them draw a line through the Sound and south at Prince Regent Inlet; through the passage between Somerset Island and Boothia Peninsula; around the west side of King William Island, around the south end of the Island, and west into Queen Maud Gulf. From there they go through Coronation Gulf and Amundson Gulf and out into the Beaufort Sea. This is the Northwest Passage.

Whaling and the fur trade in Canada's North

In the effort to find the Northwest Passage, the Europeans discovered the abundance of whales in the North. Whale oil and baleen, or whale bones, were in high demand in Europe in the 19th century. The whale bones were strong but flexible and perfect for corsets and horse whips. The whalers set up stations along the coast of Baffin Island and Hudson's Bay. During the same time period the Hudson's Bay fur-trading company also established posts in the far north mainly for white fox pelts and seal skins. Both industries had contact with the Inuit and traded goods with them. New words were introduced into the Inuit language that had English origins, words such as paper that became paipaq; tea became ti; and sugar became sukaq. The Inuit also incorporated some of the new materials into their art. The women used "duffel", a coarse wool from England, to make coats that they later appliquéd and embroidered. The accordion and Jew's harp were mixed with traditional Inuit music creating a new sound. In these early years of contact, the Inuit were successful in incorporating aspects of European culture into their language and arts without losing their own culture. Given the limited contact and the fact that few whites settled in the area, there was little threat to the Inuit way of life. This came later after the North was transferred to Canada.

At the turn of the 20th century, when whaling declined, the Hudson's Bay Company started to trap the Arctic Fox in the North – an industry that lasted until the 1930s and did impact the Inuit economy rather substantially. When the fox trade ended, many Inuit starved as a result of becoming dependent on a non-traditional economy. Nonetheless, unlike aboriginal groups south of the territories, there was still no European settlement in the North or interest in the Inuit on the part of the Canadian government. This all changed with the onset of World War II when Canada, suspicious of enemy infiltration via the under-populated North, established a radar system along the Arctic Coast. Sovereignty concerns continued during the Cold War at which time the Canadian government began to intervene in the lives of the Inuit in a significant way and with disastrous results.

Cultural revitalization

In the late 1800s the Northwest Territories, which then included all of the northern lands, was transferred from Britain to Canada. Because of concerns over national sovereignty, the Canadian government took increased control of the area. During the 19th century the whalers were expected to pay duties and trade was monitored between whalers, fur traders, and the Inuit. Later, during World War II and the Cold War, there was fear of enemy infiltration in the northern part of the continent. Canada and the U.S. worked together to set up radar across the North and monitor activity in the area. In the 1950s and 60s, the

Canadian government began to take increased control of the Inuit way of life providing housing and mandatory education.

Until the 1950s the Canadian government believed that the less impact on aboriginal culture, the better – there was little pressure for natives to integrate into mainstream society. But as a result of the atrocities of World War II combined with a strong economy, the philosophy of the country changed. Canada now believed that no one should live in poverty and increasingly social programs were set up across the country. While these programs had positive results in the south, they interrupted traditional life for the Inuit and created a dependency on the government.

These changes were intended to guarantee Inuit survival and to assimilate them into the Canadian nation. However, the outcome was not good. The loss of the traditional way of life created a loss of meaning for the Inuit. Their way of life was based on Inuit philosophy and culture which connected the Inuit to the land, nature, and to one another. The Inuit had practiced a way of life that challenged them, sustained them, and gave them meaning. In a matter of a couple of decades, their meaning was taken from them and replaced with something that had little relevance in their culture. The people became dependent on government money and the new way of life and forgot their traditional ways. Many became depressed due to the radical changes and some turned to alcohol, drugs, and even suicide.

Perhaps more than any other form of assimilation, government education had the greatest impact on the Inuit culture. The schools were mainly residential schools run by either the Catholic or Protestant Churches but funded by the federal government. In many cases the Inuit children were taken from their homes and families for up to a year at a time, sometimes even longer. Only in the summers would they return to their communities. At the schools the children were not allowed to speak a word of Inuktitut. Freelance writer, Ann Meekitjuk Hanson, remembers having a wallet thrown at her for daring to speak Inuktitut.

The Inuit Tapirisat of Canada, the national Inuit organization, says of the impact of Europeans and North Americans, "Unlike many indigenous peoples in other parts of the world, Inuit were not directly threatened with guns or violence, yet we certainly suffered as a result of policies and actions imposed on us by whalers, fur traders, missionaries, government and, most recently, developers . . . Although the intention may not have been to destroy us, it was certainly to change us. We have come to understand that outside interests, whatever they represented, were not prepared to deal with us based on an understanding of our rights as aboriginal people."

Residential schools in the North were run by Catholic and Protestant churches but funded by the government. Many Inuit children were taken from their homes for up to a year at a time. The alienation these children felt and the depression caused by radical changes in the

society, lead to a high incident of physical abuse, substance abuse and some of the highest suicide rates in the world. Residential schools basically severed the children from their own families, their culture and ultimately, from themselves. This short period of intense colonization has caused the highest rates of unemployment, spousal abuse, substance abuse, suicide and poverty in the nation. After a generation of residential education, the Inuit, like other aboriginal people across North America and the world, began to organize politically and to fight for self-determination and decolonization.

By the time they returned home the Inuit children had lost some of their language and taken on cultural practices that were foreign to their parents and grandparents. Usually they looked different too. Their hair might be cut differently and their clothing would be clearly not what the families traditionally wore. This caused great sadness in the older generation as their children were not only losing their culture, but they were losing their children in the process. This also put the children at odds with themselves as they were no longer comfortable in either setting. Some attribute the higher rates in suicide and substance abuse to this period of educational assimilation. Ann Meekitjuk Hanson believes this is true. "From that time on we, without knowing it, were in mourning for the loss of language, culture, skills and spirituality that is connected to nature. We turned to alcohol, drugs, substance abuse and self-destruction." One of the primary goals for the Inuit is to have more control over their education.

The Inuit people began to seriously look at curriculum development in the mid-1980s when they were given funding by the federal government for language enhancement. Since that time a steering committee has been set up with one representative from each of the Inuit regions. The representatives are all teachers that work in the Inuit languages. They have named this new curriculum Inuuqatigiit. It is from the Inuit philosophy implying unity between the children, teachers, families, and communities. In many areas of the U.S. and Canada there are concentrated groups of racial or ethnic minorities that are developing their own curriculum or starting schools that focus on the language, history and culture of their group. The goal is that the children develop a stronger sense of who they are and have pride in that identity. "When I looked through Inuuqatigiit", says Inuk Mimi Akeagok, "I saw my life written in it. It is familiar."

In what will be the new territory of Nunavut, this curriculum is already in place and continues to be developed. One of the key components of the curriculum is language: all children will learn their aboriginal language as well as English. The majority of the Inuit speak Inuktitut but there are two other languages — Inuinnaqtun and Inuvialuktun — which will also be taught in the appropriate areas. In other parts of North America we have classes for non-English speakers called English as a Second Language or ESL. In Nunavut they have

classes in ISL or Inuktitut, Inuinnaqtun or Inuvialuktun as a Second Language for those children who do not know their native language. Language is one of the most vital parts of the new curriculum because of the strong belief that an entire world view is part of language and without it, one's culture cannot be fully understood.

Nunavut – winning back self-determination

In Canada many First Nations people are fighting for land rights and self-government. They want to claim back their land and to have a say over their education, health services, language, economy, and culture. In the early 70s a landmark case in British Columbia called the "Calder Case" put "land claims" and "aboriginal rights" into the vocabulary and minds of the Canadian government and people of Canada. For the first time in Canada's history a First Nations group pressed for "aboriginal title" to land they had occupied historically. This was the beginning of many cases being brought before provincial courts and the Supreme Court of Canada. This provided a model for the Inuit. In 1976 the Inuit Tapirisat of Canada (ITC) proposed that a new territory be created to settle land claims in the area.

Land rights is a complicated issue. Europeans believe that in order to have land rights you have to have legal proof of ownership. The First Nations, being an oral culture, do not have written records and so cannot "prove" that they had first claim to the land. Today a very interesting thing is happening in Canada. The courts are accepting the evidence about making land claims. In a recent court ruling in British Columbia entitled the Delgamuukw ruling, the Chief Justice Antonio Lamer said that oral evidence must be put on equal footing with other types of historical evidence such as written documents. This means that a First Nations group can use the memories of their elders to "prove" that they have some sort of claim to a particular piece of land because they inhabited it for decades or centuries. The Inuit in Northern Québec have won the right to control their own education and other legal matters. And, in 1999 the Inuit in Nunavut will have almost complete control over their government. One way to think about self-government is to realize that when a people has control over themselves they have control over their own education. This means that the Inuit in Northern Québec as well as a good many other groups across the territories, now teach their own languages in the schools.

In 1982 a plebiscite was held in the Northwest Territories to determine the public's support for Nunavut. Over 50% voted in favor. From the early 80s on, plans started to move ahead on where to draw the border between the two territories and to establish the new political

structure. On 10 June 1993 The Nunavut Act received Royal Assent which established the framework for the new government. The creation of Nunavut was on its way.

The creation of Nunavut ("our land" in Inuktitut) in 1999 is the largest land claims settlement between an aboriginal group and a state in history. In addition, it is the only province, state, or territory in North America that will be run by First Nations people. Because the Inuit people will make up over 80% of the population in the new territory, they will have self-determination by the fact of being a majority.

The concept of Nunavut was first raised in the 60s when legislation was introduced in the House of Commons. However, it wasn't until the 70s that the Inuit Tapirisat of Canada – the national organization for the Inuit – was created. With the leadership of several Inuit including the "father" of Nunavut, John Amagoalik, negotiations began with the federal government and the territorial government of the Northwest Territories leading to the creation of Nunavut.

Inuit Tapirisat of Canada:

By the late 60s there was a clear realization on the part of the Inuit that in order to regain control over their way of life, they were going to have to become involved in the political process. The first step in this process was a structure or organization that would unite the Inuit with a common voice regardless of whether they were from the Northwest Territories or northern Québec. This realization and determination led to the founding of the national Inuit organization, the Inuit Tapiristat of Canada.

The Inuit Tapirisat of Canada (ITC) was founded in 1971 at a conference in Ottawa. The first order of business was the pressing need to take action on land claims as, since the mid-60s major nonrenewable resource development projects had been being proposed in the North. Loss of territorial rights and environmental impact were major concerns. "With the arrival of outsiders first from Europe and later from North America, the Inuit way of life started to change, and we have had to struggle very hard to maintain control over our culture, territory and resources."

The ITC took the lead in discussions with the federal government regarding their concerns over land use rights in the North. Before resolving these issues, the actual geographic location of Inuit territory had to be established as well as the seasonal use of this territory.

Land use refers to the hunting, trapping, fishing and other activities that take place on the land comprising territory and the day-to-day and seasonal use of the land that can be documented demonstrating Inuit claim to a territory. What is distinct about Inuit land-use is that the land is not changed or altered by use, "We have left our footprints but in quiet ways." Interestingly, the only way this information could be collected was by talking directly to hunters - by having them transfer their life and experience on the land onto paper. "Occupancy" of the land is slightly different than land use - it is the meaning and value of life on the land. "The term "occupancy" refers to the social, intellectual, and economic systems that underlie our patterns of land use." The study of land use and occupancy were conducted in the 1970s by the federal government and completed in the 1970s. Although no one knew it at the time, this study was to provide the geographic basis of the new territory of Nunavut. At the completion of the study the Inuit Tapirisat of Canada worked with the federal government to devise an agreement-in-principle for the creation of the new territory to be carved out of the Northwest Territories. The negotiation for land claims and territory had begun.

In the early 90s legislation was passed for the creation of the territory. On June 10th, 1993 the Mulroney government in Ottawa gave Royal Assent to the Nunavut Act and the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement Act. As soon as assent was given, the Inuit formed a commission to act as an advisor and intermediary between the Inuit, Northwest Territories and federal government. John Amagoalik headed this commission, called the Nunavut Implementation Commission. Their first report was tabled in 1995 and appropriately entitled, "Footprints in the New Snow."

On 1 April 1999, the new territory of Nunavut was officially inaugurated with Jack Anawak as the new premier. The flag and coat of arms were also unveiled at this time. The Department of Indian and Northern Affairs has written in its recent publications that, "The birth of Nunavut is a significant step in Canada's nation building. The territory's creation is anchored in the central idea – that Canada's flexible federation supports diversity. Nunavut, which means "our land" in Inuktitut, is both an historic and extraordinary achievement. At a time when borders are often the source of strife, the map of Canada is being redrawn in peace and partnership."

For the first time since Newfoundland joined Canada in 1949 and Hawaii joined the U.S. in 1959, the map of Canada and of North America have been redrawn. Nunavut encompasses about 1,200 million square miles or about 1/5th of Canada's entire land mass (and is 18 times the size of Washington State) with a population of only 22,000 people or 2/3rds of the student body at the University of Washington. The capital is Iqaluit on Baffin Island with a population of about 4,500. There are only 28 communities Nunavut and only one road 13 miles in length.

The daily runnings of the government are in Inuktitut, the Inuit language, though services are also provided in French and English. In both the Northwest Territories and Nunavut there are no parties. Each person runs for office as an individual. There are 19 seats and once all are elected they decide, by consensus, who will be the leader of the territory or the premier. The Inuit government is also incorporating the wisdom of the elders into the government system so that cultural values will be an integral part of decision-making.

Education

The Inuit people began to seriously look at curriculum development in the mid-1980s when they were given funding by the federal government for language enhancement. Since that time a steering committee has been set up with one representative from each of the Inuit regions. The representatives are teachers who work in the Inuit languages. They have named this new curriculum *Inuuqatigiit*. It is from the Inuit philosophy implying unity between the children, teachers, families, and communities. The goal is for the children to develop a stronger sense of who they are and to have pride in that identity. One of the key components of the curriculum is language – all children will learn their aboriginal language as well as English. Language is one of the most vital parts of the new curriculum because of the belief that culture is embodied in language and cannot be fully known otherwise.

Conclusion

The Inuit culture is very family and community-based. There is far less importance placed on material items than there is in the rest of North America. Most everything is shared and the accumulation of wealth is not admired. Respect of others and nature is a high value which means that many Inuit live simply and in harmony with the land. Their approach is called subsistence living, that is they only take what they need and leave the rest for others. "For the Inuit, the meaning of life is to share", says an Inuk. The Inuit share their homes with others too, even strangers. Inuit people like others to feel comfortable in their home and to make themselves part of the family. This is the highest honor you can pay

your host — to not be awkward in their home. If the door is not locked, an Inuit family wants you to walk in without knocking. This shows that you treat their place as though it is your own.

First Nations people in North America have by and large been colonized by European settlers. Now, for the first time, one nation — the Inuit — will win back almost complete control of their economy, government, culture, and language. After years of assimilation efforts by the Canadian government and missionaries, the Inuit will be in control of their own destiny. It will be a fascinating experiment to watch. How will Inuit-based education affect the children over time? Will learning their own language make a difference to their sense of identity? Nunavut, like Québec, will hopefully become another model for how a minority culture can survive and thrive within the larger North American context. Nunavut is not simply the sectioning off of the eastern portion of the Northwest Territories. It is the creation of an Inuit homeland where the government and educational system will be guided by Inuit philosophy.