The Inuit
Indigenous peoples of the Arctic Regions
Inuit

The Inuit are a group of culturally similar indigenous peoples inhabiting the Arctic regions of Canada (Northwest Territories, Nunatsiavut, Nunavik, Nunavut, Nunatukavut, Siberia), Denmark (Greenland), Russia (Siberia) and the United States (Alaska). Inuit means “the people” in the Inuktitut language. An Inuk is an Inuit person. The Inuit language is grouped under Eskimo-Aleut languages.

The Inuit live throughout most of the Canadian Arctic and subarctic: in the territory of Nunavut ("our land"); the northern third of Quebec, in an area called Nunavik ("place to live"); the coastal region of Labrador, in areas called Nunatsiavut ("our beautiful land") and Nunatukavut ("Our Ancient Land"); in various parts of the Northwest Territories, mainly on the coast of the Arctic Ocean and formerly in the Yukon. Collectively these areas are known as Inuit Nunangat.

In the US, Alaskan Inupiat live on the North Slope of Alaska and Siberian Coast, Little Diomede Island and Big Diomede Island. Greenland's Kalaallit are citizens of Denmark.

In Alaska, the term Eskimo is commonly used, because it includes both Yupik and Inupiat, while Inuit is not accepted as a collective term or even specifically used for Inupiat (who technically are Inuit). No universal replacement term for Eskimo, inclusive of all Inuit and Yupik people, is accepted across the geographical area inhabited by the Inuit and Yupik peoples.

In Canada and Greenland, the Natives prefer the word Inuit. As they consider "Eskimo" pejorative, it has fallen out of favour. In Canada, the Constitution Act of 1982, sections 25 and 35 recognised the Inuit as a distinctive group of Canadian aboriginals, who are neither First Nations nor Métis.
Early history

For pre-history, see: Paleo-Indians and Archaic periods (Canada)

Inuit are the descendants of what anthropologists call the Thule culture, who emerged from western Alaska around 1000 AD and spread eastwards across the Arctic. They displaced the related Dorset culture, the last major Paleo-Eskimo culture (in Inuktitut, called the Tuniit). Inuit legends speak of the Tuniit as "giants", people who were taller and stronger than the Inuit.[10] Less frequently, the legends refer to the Dorset as "dwarfs".[11] Researchers believe that the Dorset culture lacked dogs, larger weapons and other technologies that gave the expanding Inuit society an advantage. By 1300, the Inuit had settled in west Greenland, and they moved into east Greenland over the following century.

Faced with population pressures from the Thule and other surrounding groups, such as the Algonquian and Siouan to the south, the Tuniit gradually receded.[12] They were thought to have become completely extinct as a people by about 1400–1500 AD.

But, in the mid 1950s, researcher Henry B. Collins determined that, based on the ruins found at Native Point, the Sadlermiut were likely the last remnants of the Dorset culture.[13] The Sadlermiut population survived up until winter 1902–03, when exposure to new infectious diseases brought by contact with Europeans led to their extinction as a people.[14] More recently, mitochondrial DNA research has supported the theory of continuity between the Tuniit and the Sadlermiut.[15] [16] It also has provided evidence that a population displacement did not occur within the Aleutian Islands between the Dorset and Thule transition.[17] In contrast to other Tuniit populations, the Aleut and Sadlermiut benefited from both geographical isolation and their ability to adopt certain Thule technologies.

In Canada and Greenland, Inuit circulated almost exclusively north of the "Arctic tree line", the de facto southern border of Inuit society. The most southern Inuit community in the world is Rigolet,[18] Nunatsiavut, Newfoundland and Labrador. To the south, Native American cultures were well established. The culture and technology of Inuit society that served so well in the Arctic were not suited to subarctic regions, so they did not displace their southern neighbours.

Inuit had trade relations with more southern cultures; boundary disputes were common and gave rise to aggressive actions. Warfare, in general, was not uncommon among those Inuit groups with sufficient population density. Inuit, such as the Nunatamiut (Uummarmiut) who inhabited the Mackenzie River delta area, often engaged in warfare. The Central Arctic Inuit lacked the population density to do so.

Their first European contacts were with the Vikings who settled in Greenland and explored the eastern Canadian coast. The Norse literature noted skrælingar, most likely an undifferentiated label for all the native peoples of the Americas whom the Norse encountered: Tuniit, Inuit and Beothuk alike.

Sometime in the 13th century, the Thule culture began arriving in Greenland from what is now Canada. Norse accounts are scant; however, Norse-made items have been found at Inuit campsites in Greenland. It is unclear whether they were there as the result of trade or plunder. One old account speaks of "small people" with whom the Norsemen fought. Ívar Bárðarson's[19] 14th-century account noted that the western settlement, one of the two Norse settlements, had been taken over by the skraelings. The reason why the Norse settlements failed is unclear. The last record of them is from 1408, roughly the same period as the earliest Inuit settlements in east Greenland.

After about 1350, the climate grew colder during the period known as the Little Ice Age. Inuit were forced to abandon hunting and whaling sites in the high Arctic. As bowhead whaling disappeared in Canada and Greenland, Inuit had to subsist on a much poorer diet. In addition, they lost access to essential raw materials derived from
whaling for their tools and architecture. During this period, Alaskan natives were, however, able to continue their whaling activities.

The changing climate forced Inuit to work their way south, forcing them into marginal niches along the edges of the tree line. These were areas which Native Americans had not occupied, or where they were weak enough for coexistence with Inuit. Researchers have difficulty defining when Inuit stopped territorial expansion. There is evidence that they were still moving into new territory in southern Labrador when they first began to interact with colonial North Americans in the 17th century.

**Nomenclature**

In Canada and Greenland, the term *Eskimo* has fallen out of favour, as Natives consider it pejorative.\[7\]\[8\] It has been replaced by *Inuit*. But, while *Inuit* describes all of the Eskimo peoples in Canada and Greenland, it does not encompass all the peoples in Alaska and Siberia.

In Alaska, the term *Eskimo* is commonly used, because it applies to both *Yupik* and *Inupiat* peoples. *Inuit* is not accepted as a collective term or even specifically used for *Inupiat* (which technically is *Inuit*). No universal replacement term for Eskimo, inclusive of all Inuit and Yupik people, is accepted across the geographical area inhabited by the Inuit and Yupik peoples.\[6\]

### Inuit, Inupiat and Yupik

The Inuit Circumpolar Council, a United Nations-recognised non-governmental organization (NGO), defines its constituency to include Canada’s Inuit and Inuvialuit; Greenland’s Kalaallit Inuit; Alaska’s Inupiat and Yup’ik people; and the Siberian Yupik people of Russia.\[20\]

But, the *Yupik* of Alaska and Siberia do not consider themselves *Inuit*. Ethnographers agree they are a distinct people. They prefer to be called Yup’ik, Yupiit, or Eskimo. The Yupik languages are linguistically distinct from the Inuit languages.\[6\]

Canada’s Constitution Act, 1982 recognised the Inuit as Aboriginal peoples in Canada, which also include First Nations and Métis peoples.\[9\]. The Inuit are not to be confused with the *Innu*, a distinct First Nations people who live in northeastern Quebec and Labrador. They speak an Algonquian language known as *Innu-aimun* or *Montagnais*. 
Inuit

Cultural history

Language

The Inuit speak chiefly one of the traditional Inuit languages or dialects, sometimes grouped under the term Inuktitut, but they may also speak the predominant language of the country in which they reside. Inuktitut is mainly spoken in Nunavut and, as the Greenlandic language, in some parts of Greenland.

Some of the Inuit dialects were recorded in the 18th century. Until the latter half of the 20th century, most Inuit were not able to read and write in their own language. In the 1760s, Moravian missionaries arrived in Greenland, where they contributed to the development of a written system of language called Qaliujaappait, based on the Latin alphabet. The missionaries later brought this system to Labrador, from which it eventually spread as far as Alaska.²¹

The Inuktitut syllabary used in Canada is based on the Cree syllabary devised by the missionary James Evans and developed by Edmund Peck. The present form of the syllabary for Canadian Inuktitut was adopted by the Inuit Cultural Institute in Canada in the 1970s. The Inuit in Alaska, the Inuvialuit, Inuvialuktun speakers; and Inuit in Greenland and Labrador use the Roman alphabet, although it has been adapted for their use in different ways.

Though conventionally called a syllabary, the writing system has been classified by some observers as an abugida. Syllables starting with the same consonant have related glyphs rather than unrelated ones. All of the characters needed for the Inuktitut syllabary are available in the Unicode character repertoire. (See Canadian Aboriginal syllabics character table.) The territorial government of Nunavut has developed a TrueType font called Pigiarniq for computer displays, designed by Vancouver-based Tiro Typeworks.²² [²³]

The Inuit language is written in several different ways, depending on the dialect and region, but also on historical and political factors. In Greenland during the 1760s, Moravian missionaries intending to introduce Inuit to Christianity through the Bible contributed to the development of an Inuktitut writing system that was based on Roman orthography. When they travelled to Labrador in the 19th century, they brought the written Inuktitut with them. The Roman alphabet-writing scheme is distinguished by its inclusion of the letter kra. The Alaskan Yupik and Inupiat, and the Siberian Yupik also adopted the system of Roman orthography. In addition, the Alaskan peoples developed their own system of hieroglyphics.

Eastern Canadian Inuit were the last to adopt the written word. In the 1860s, missionaries imported the written system Qaniujaappait,²⁴ which they had developed in their efforts to convert the Cree to Christianity. The last Inuit to encounter missionaries and writing were the Netsilik Inuit in Kugaaruk and north Baffin Island. The Netsilik adopted Qaniujaappait by the 1920s.

As the "Greenlandic" system has been substantially reformed in recent years, Labrador writing has become used only for the Nunatsiavummiut dialect. In Nunavut and Nunavik, most people write Inuktitut using a scheme called Qaniujaappait, or Inuktitut syllabics, based on Canadian Aboriginal syllabics. The western part of Nunavut and the Northwest Territories use a Roman orthography (alphabet scheme) usually identified as Inuinnaqtun or Qaliujaappait.²⁴ This reflects the influence of the missionaries who reached this area in the late 19th century and early 20th century.
Diet

The Inuit have traditionally been hunters and fishers. They still hunt whales (esp. bowhead whale), walrus, caribou, seal, polar bears, muskoxen, birds, and at times other less commonly eaten animals such as the Arctic Fox. The typical Inuit diet is high in protein and very high in fat - in their traditional diets, Inuit consumed an average of 75% of their daily energy intake from fat. While it is not possible to cultivate plants for food in the Arctic, the Inuit have traditionally gathered those that are naturally available. Grasses, tubers, roots, stems, berries, and seaweed (kuanniq or edible seaweed) were collected and preserved depending on the season and the location. There is a vast array of different hunting technologies that the Inuit used to gather their food.

In the 1920s anthropologist Vilhjalmur Stefansson lived with and studied a group of Inuit. The study focused on the fact that the Inuit's extremely low-carbohydrate diet had no adverse effects on their health, nor indeed, Stefansson's own health. Stefansson (1946) also observed that the Inuit were able to get the necessary vitamins they needed from their traditional winter diet, which did not contain any plant matter. In particular, he found that adequate vitamin C could be obtained from items in their traditional diet of raw meat such as Ringed Seal liver and whale skin (muktuk). While there was considerable scepticism when he reported these findings, they have been borne out in recent studies.

Transport, navigation, and dogs

The natives hunted sea animals from single-passenger, covered seal-skin boats called qajaq (Inuktitut syllabics: ᖃᔭᖅ) which were extraordinarily buoyant, and could easily be righted by a seated person, even if completely overturned. Because of this property the design was copied by Europeans, and Americans who still produce them under the Inuit name kayak.

Inuit also made umiaq ("woman's boat"), larger open boats made of wood frames covered with animal skins, for transporting people, goods and dogs. They were 6–12 m (20–39 ft) long and had a flat bottom so that the boats could come close to shore. In the winter, Inuit would also hunt sea mammals by patiently watching an aglu (breathing hole) in the ice and waiting for the air-breathing seals to use them. This technique is also used by the polar bear, who hunts by seeking holes in the ice and waiting nearby.

On land, the Inuit used dog sleds (qamuutik) for transportation. The husky dog breed comes from Inuit breeding of dogs and wolves for transportation. A team of dogs in either a tandem/side-by-side or fan formation would pull a sled made of wood, animal bones, or the baleen from a whale's mouth and even frozen fish, over the snow and ice. The Inuit used stars to navigate at sea and landmarks to navigate on land; they possessed a comprehensive native system of toponymy. Where natural landmarks were insufficient, the Inuit would erect an inukshuk.

Dogs played an integral role in the annual routine of the Inuit. During the summer they became pack animals, sometimes dragging up to 20 kg (44 lb) of baggage and in the winter they pulled the sled. Yearlong they assisted with hunting by sniffing out seals' holes and pestering polar bears. They also protected the Inuit villages by barking.
at bears and strangers. The Inuit generally favoured, and tried to breed, the most striking and handsome of dogs, especially ones with bright eyes and a healthy coat. Common husky dog breeds used by the Inuit were the Canadian Eskimo Dog, the official animal of Nunavut,\textsuperscript{[35]} (*Qimmig*, Inuktitut for dog), the Greenland Dog, the Siberian Husky and the Alaskan Malamute. The Inuit would perform rituals over the newborn pup to give it favourable qualities; the legs were pulled to make them grow strong and nose was poked with a pin to enhance the sense of smell.

**Industry, art, and clothing**

Inuit industry relied almost exclusively on animal hides, driftwood, and bones, although some tools were also made out of worked stones, particularly the readily worked soapstone. Walrus ivory was a particularly essential material, used to make knives. Art played a big part in Inuit society and continues to do so today. Small sculptures of animals and human figures, usually depicting everyday activities such as hunting and whaling, were carved from ivory and bone. In modern times prints and figurative works carved in relatively soft stone such as soapstone, serpentinite, or argillite have also become popular.

Inuit made clothes and footwear from animal skins, sewn together using needles made from animal bones and threads made from other animal products, such as sinew. The anorak (parka) is made in a similar fashion by Arctic peoples from Europe through Asia and the Americas, including the Inuit. The hood of an *amauti*, (women's parka, plural *amautit*) was traditionally made extra large, to allow the mother to carry a baby against her back and protect it from the harsh wind. Styles vary from region to region, from the shape of the hood to the length of the tails. Boots (*mukluk* or *kamit*), could be made of caribou or seal skin, and designs varied for men and women.

During the winter, certain Inuit lived in a temporary shelter made from snow called an *iglu*, and during the few months of the year when temperatures were above freezing, they lived in tents made of animal skins supported by a frame of bones. Some, such as the Siglit, used driftwood,\textsuperscript{[36]} while others built sod houses.\textsuperscript{[37]}
Gender roles, marriage, birth, and community

The division of labour in traditional Inuit society had a strong gender component, but it was not absolute. The men were traditionally hunters and fishermen and the women took care of the children, cleaned the home, sewed, processed food, and cooked. However, there are numerous examples of women who hunted, out of necessity or as a personal choice. At the same time men, who could be away from camp for several days at a time, would be expected to know how to sew and cook.\footnote{38}

The marital customs among the Inuit were not strictly monogamous: many Inuit relationships were implicitly or explicitly sexual. Open marriages, polygamy, divorce, and remarriage were known. Among some Inuit groups, if there were children, divorce required the approval of the community and particularly the agreement of the elders. Marriages were often arranged, sometimes in infancy, and occasionally forced on the couple by the community.\footnote{39}

Marriage was common for women at puberty and for men when they became productive hunters. Family structure was flexible: a household might consist of a man and his wife (or wives) and children; it might include his parents or his wife's parents as well as adopted children; it might be a larger formation of several siblings with their parents, wives and children; or even more than one family sharing dwellings and resources. Every household had its head, an elder or a particularly respected man.\footnote{40}

There was also a larger notion of community as, generally, several families shared a place where they wintered. Goods were shared within a household, and also, to a significant extent, within a whole community.

The Inuit were hunter–gatherers,\footnote{41} and have been referred to as nomadic.\footnote{42} One of the customs following the birth of an infant was for an \textit{Angakkuq} (shaman) to place a tiny ivory carving of a whale into the baby's mouth, in hopes this would make the child good at hunting. Loud singing and drumming were also customary after a birth.\footnote{43}
Inuit

Raiding

Virtually all Inuit cultures have oral traditions of raids by other indigenous peoples, including fellow Inuit, and of taking vengeance on them in return, such as the Bloody Falls Massacre. Western observers often regarded these tales as generally not entirely accurate historical accounts, but more as self-serving myths. However, evidence shows that Inuit cultures had quite accurate methods of teaching historical accounts to each new generation.\[^{44}\]

The historic accounts of violence against outsiders does make clear that there was a history of hostile contact within the Inuit cultures and with other cultures.\[^{45}\] It also makes it clear that Inuit nations existed through history, as well as confederations of such nations. The known confederations were usually formed to defend against a more prosperous, and thus stronger, nation. Alternately, people who lived in less productive geographical areas tended to be less warlike, as they had to spend more time producing food.

Justice within Inuit culture was moderated by the form of governance that gave significant power to the elders. As in most cultures around the world, justice could be harsh and often included capital punishment for serious crimes against the community or the individual. During raids against other peoples, the Inuit, like their non-Inuit neighbours, tended to be merciless.\[^{46}\]

Suicide, murder, and death

"A pervasive European myth about Inuit is that they killed elderly (senicide) and unproductive people.\[^{47}\] but this is not generally true.\[^{48}\] [49] [50] In a culture with an oral history, elders are the keepers of communal knowledge, effectively the community library.\[^{51}\] Because they are of extreme value as the repository of knowledge, there are cultural taboos against sacrificing elders.\[^{52}\] [53]"

In Antoon A. Leenaars book *Suicide in Canada* he states that "Rasmussen found that the death of elders by suicide was a commonplace among the Iglulik Inuit."\[^{54}\] He heard of many old men and women who had hanged themselves.\[^{54}\] By ensuring they died a violent death, Inuit elders purified their souls for journey to the afterworld.\[^{54}\]

According to Franz Boas, suicide was "...not of rare occurrence..." and was generally accomplished through hanging.\[^{55}\] Writing of the Labrador Inuit, Hawkes (1916) was considerably more explicit on the subject of suicide and the burden of the elderly:

> Aged people who have outlived their usefulness and whose life is a burden both to themselves and their relatives are put to death by stabbing or strangulation. This is customarily done at the request of the individual concerned, but not always so. Aged people who are a hindrance on the trail are abandoned.

—Antoon A. Leenaars, *Suicide in Canada*\[^{56}\]

People seeking assistance in their suicide made three consecutive requests to relatives for help.\[^{57}\] Family members would attempt to dissuade the individual at each suggestion, but with the third request by a person, assistance became obligatory.\[^{57}\] In some cases, a suicide was a publicly acknowledged and attended event.\[^{57}\] Once the suicide had been agreed to, the victim would dress him or herself as the dead are clothed, with clothing turned inside out.\[^{57}\] The death occurred at a specific place, where the material possessions of deceased people were brought to be destroyed.\[^{57}\]

When food is not sufficient, the elderly are the least likely to survive. In the extreme case of famine, the Inuit fully understood that, if there was to be any hope of obtaining more food, a hunter was necessarily the one to feed on whatever food was left. However, a common response to desperate conditions and the threat of starvation was infanticide.\[^{58}\] [59] A mother abandoned an infant in hopes that someone less desperate might find and adopt the child before the cold or animals killed it. The belief that the Inuit regularly resorted to infanticide may be due in part to studies done by Asen Balikci,\[^{60}\] Milton Freeman\[^{61}\] and David Riches\[^{62}\] among the Netsilik, along with the trial of Kikkik.\[^{63}\] [64]
Anthropologists believed that Inuit cultures routinely killed children born with physical defects because of the demands of the extreme climate. These views were changed by late 20th century discoveries of burials at an archaeological site. Between 1982 and 1994, a storm with high winds caused ocean waves to erode part of the bluffs near Barrow, Alaska, and a body was discovered to have been washed out of the mud. Unfortunately the storm claimed the body, which was not recovered. But examination of the eroded bank indicated that an ancient house, perhaps with other remains, was likely to be claimed by the next storm. The site, known as the "Ukkuqsi archaeological site", was excavated. Several frozen bodies (now known as the "frozen family") were recovered, autopsies were performed, and they were re-interred as the first burials in the then-new Imaiqsaun Cemetery south of Barrow. Years later another body was washed out of the bluff. It was a female child, approximately 9 years old, who had clearly been born with a congenital birth defect. This child had never been able to walk, but must have been cared for by family throughout her life.

During the 19th century, the Western Arctic suffered a population decline of close to 90%, resulting from exposure to new diseases, including tuberculosis, measles, influenza, and smallpox. Autopsies near Greenland reveal that, more commonly pneumonia, kidney diseases, trichinosis, malnutrition, and degenerative disorders may have contributed to mass deaths among different Inuit tribes. The Inuit believed that the causes of the disease were of a spiritual origin.

Traditional law

Inuit traditional laws are anthropologically different from Western law concepts. ‘Customary law’ was thought non-existent in Inuit society before the introduction of the Canadian legal system. Hoebel, in 1954, concluded that only 'rudimentary law’ existed amongst the Inuit. Indeed, prior to about 1970, it is impossible to find even one reference to a Western observer who was aware that any form of governance existed among any Inuit, however, there was a set way of doing things that had to be followed:

- maligait refers to what has to be followed
- piqujait refers to what has to be done
- tirigususit refers to what has to be avoided

If an individual's actions went against the tirigususit, maligait or piqujait, the angakkuq (shaman) might have to intervene, lest the consequences be dire to the individual or the community.

We are told today that Inuit never had laws or "maligait". Why? They say because they are not written on paper. When I think of paper, I think you can tear it up, and the laws are gone. The laws of the Inuit are not on paper.

—Mariano Aupilaarjuk, Rankin Inlet, Nunavut, Perspectives on Traditional Law

Traditional beliefs

The Inuit lived in an environment that inspired a mythology filled with adventure tales of whale and walrus hunts. Long winter months of waiting for caribou herds or sitting near breathing holes hunting seals gave birth to stories of mysterious and sudden appearance of ghosts and fantastic creatures. Some Inuit looked into the aurora borealis, or northern lights, to find images of their family and friends dancing in the next life. However, some Inuit believed that the lights were more sinister and if you whistled at them, they would come down and cut off your head. This tale is still told to children today. For others some Inuit believed that the spirits of their ancestors could be seen in the northern lights.
they were invisible giants, the souls of animals, a guide to hunting and as a spirit for the angakkuq to help with healing.\[73\] They relied upon the angakkuq (shaman) for spiritual interpretation. The nearest thing to a central deity was the Old Woman (Sedna), who lived beneath the sea. The waters, a central food source, were believed to contain great gods.

The Inuit practised a form of shamanism based on animist principles. They believed that all things had a form of spirit, including humans, and that to some extent these spirits could be influenced by a pantheon of supernatural entities that could be appeased when one required some animal or inanimate thing to act in a certain way. The angakkuq of a community of Inuit was not the leader, but rather a sort of healer and psychotherapist, who tended wounds and offered advice, as well as invoking the spirits to assist people in their lives. His or her role was to see, interpret and exhort the subtle and unseen. Angakkuit were not trained; they were held to be born with the ability and recognised by the community as they approached adulthood.

Inuit religion was closely tied to a system of rituals integrated into the daily life of the people. These rituals were simple but held to be necessary. According to a customary Inuit saying,

The great peril of our existence lies in the fact that our diet consists entirely of souls.

By believing that all things, including animals, have souls like those of humans, any hunt that failed to show appropriate respect and customary supplication would only give the liberated spirits cause to avenge themselves.

The harshness and unpredictability of life in the Arctic ensured that Inuit lived with concern for the uncontrollable, where a streak of bad luck could destroy an entire community. To offend a spirit was to risk its interference with an already marginal existence. The Inuit understood that they had to work in harmony with supernatural powers to provide the necessities of day-to-day life. Before the 1940s, Inuit had minimal contact with Europeans, who passed through on their way to hunt whales or trade furs but seldom had any interest in settling down on the frozen land of the Arctic. So the Inuit had the place to themselves. They moved between summer and winter camps to always be living where there were animals to hunt.

But that changed. As World War II ended and the Cold War began, the Arctic became a place where countries that did not get along were close to each other. The Arctic had always been seen as inaccessible, but the invention of aircraft made it easier for non-Arctic dwellers to get there. As new airbases and radar stations were built in the Arctic to monitor rival nations, permanent settlements were developed around them, including schools and health care centres. In many places, Inuit children were required to attend schools that emphasised non-native traditions. With better health care, the Inuit population grew too large to sustain itself solely by hunting. Many Inuit from smaller camps moved into permanent settlements because there was access to jobs and food. In many areas Inuit were required to live in towns by the 1960s.

**Postcontact history**

**Canada**

**Early contact with Europeans**

The lives of Paleo-Eskimos of the far north were largely unaffected by the arrival of visiting Norsemen except for mutual trade.\[75\] Labrador Inuit have had the longest continuous contact with Europeans.\[76\] After the disappearance of the Norse colonies in Greenland, the Inuit had no contact with Europeans for at least a century. By the mid-16th century, Basque whalers and fishermen were already working the Labrador coast and had established whaling stations on land, such as the one that has been excavated at Red Bay.\[77\] \[78\] The Inuit appear not to have interfered with their operations, but they raided the stations in winter for tools and items made of worked iron, which they adapted to their own needs.

Martin Frobisher's 1576 search for the Northwest Passage was the first well-documented post-Columbian contact between Europeans and Inuit. Frobisher's expedition landed in Frobisher Bay, Baffin Island, not far from the
settlement now called The City of Iqaluit which was long known as Frobisher Bay. Frobisher encountered Inuit on Resolution Island where five sailors left the ship, under orders from Frobisher, and became part of Inuit mythology. The homesick sailors, tired of their adventure, attempted to leave in a small vessel and vanished. Frobisher brought an unwilling Inuk to England, doubtless the first Inuk ever to visit Europe. The Inuit oral tradition, in contrast, recounts the natives helping Frobisher’s crewmen, whom they believed had been abandoned.

The semi-nomadic eco-centred Inuit were fishers and hunters harvesting lakes, seas, ice platforms and tundra. While there are some allegations that Inuit were hostile to early French and English explorers, fishers and whalers, more recent research suggests that the early relations with whaling stations along the Labrador coast and later James Bay were based on a mutual interest in trade. In the final years of the 18th century, the Moravian Church began missionary activities in Labrador, supported by the British who were tired of the raids on their whaling stations. The Moravian missionaries could easily provide the Inuit with the iron and basic materials they had been stealing from whaling outposts, materials whose real cost to Europeans was almost nothing, but whose value to the Inuit was enormous and from then on contacts in Labrador were far more peaceful.

The European arrival tremendously damaged the Inuit way of life, causing mass death through new diseases introduced by whalers and explorers, and enormous social disruptions caused by the distorting effect of Europeans’ material wealth. Nonetheless, Inuit society in the higher latitudes had largely remained in isolation during the 19th century. The Hudson’s Bay Company opened trading posts such as Great Whale River (1820), today the site of the twin villages of Whapmagoostui and Kuujjuarapik, where whale products of the commercial whale hunt were processed and furs traded. The British Naval Expedition of 1821-3 led by Admiral William Edward Parry, which twice overwintered in Foxe Basin, provided the first informed, sympathetic and well-documented account of the economic, social and religious life of the Inuit. Parry stayed in what is now Igloolik over the second winter. Parry's writings, with pen and ink illustrations of Inuit everyday life, and those of George Francis Lyon, both published in 1824 were widely read. Captain George Comer's Inuit wife Shoofly, known for her sewing skills and elegant attire, was influential in convincing him to acquire more sewing accessories and beads for trade with Inuit.

Early 20th century

During the early 20th century a few traders and missionaries circulated among the more accessible bands, and after 1904 they were accompanied by a handful of Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP). Unlike most Aboriginal peoples in Canada, however, the lands occupied by the Inuit were of little interest to European settlers — to the southerners, the homeland of the Inuit was a hostile hinterland. Southerners enjoyed lucrative careers as bureaucrats and service providers to the north, but very few ever chose to visit there. Canada, with its more hospitable lands largely settled, began to take a greater interest in its more peripheral territories, especially the fur and mineral-rich hinterlands. By the late 1920s, there were no longer any Inuit who had not been contacted by traders, missionaries or government agents. In 1939, the Supreme Court of Canada found, in a decision known as Re Eskimos, that the Inuit should be considered Indians and were thus under the jurisdiction of the federal government.

Native customs were worn down by the actions of the RCMP, who enforced Canadian criminal law on Inuit, such as Kikkik, who often could not understand what they had done wrong, and by missionaries who preached a moral code very different from the one they were used to. Many of the Inuit were systematically converted to Christianity in the 19th and 20th centuries, through rituals like the Siqqitiq.
Second World War to the 1960s

World War II and the Cold War made Arctic Canada strategically important for the first time and, thanks to the development of modern aircraft, accessible year-round. The construction of air bases and the Distant Early Warning Line in the 1940s and 1950s brought more intensive contacts with European society, particularly in the form of public education, which traditionalists complained instilled foreign values disdainful of the traditional structure of Inuit society. [82]

In the 1950s the High Arctic relocation was undertaken by the Government of Canada for several reasons. These were to include protecting Canada's sovereignty in the Arctic, alleviating hunger (as the area currently occupied had been over-hunted), and attempting to solve the "Eskimo problem", meaning the assimilation and end of the Inuit culture. One of the more notable relocation's was undertaken in 1953, when 17 families were moved from Port Harrison (now Inukjuak, Quebec) to Resolute and Grise Fiord. They were dropped off in early September when winter had already arrived. The land they were sent to was very different from that in the Inukjuak area; it was barren, with only a couple of months when the temperature rose above freezing and several months of polar night. The families were told by the RCMP they would be able to return within two years if conditions were not right. However, two years later more families were relocated to the High Arctic and it was to be thirty years before they were able to visit Inukjuak. [83] [84] [85]

By 1953, Canada's prime minister Louis St. Laurent publicly admitted, "Apparently we have administered the vast territories of the north in an almost continuing absence of mind." [86] The government began to establish about forty permanent administrative centres to provide education, health and economic development services. [86] Inuit from hundreds of smaller camps scattered across the north, began to congregate in these hamlets. [87]

Regular visits from doctors, and access to modern medical care raised the birth rate and decreased the death rate, causing an enormous natural increase. Before long, the Inuit population was beyond the carrying capacity of the ecosystem (that which hunting and fishing could support). By the mid-1960s, encouraged first by missionaries, then by the prospect of paid jobs and government services, and finally forced by hunger and required by police, all Canadian Inuit lived year-round in permanent settlements. The nomadic migrations that were the central feature of Arctic life had for the most part disappeared. The Inuit, a once self-sufficient people in an extremely harsh environment were, in the span of perhaps two generations, transformed into a small, impoverished minority, lacking skills or resources to sell to the larger economy, but increasingly dependent on it for survival.

Although anthropologists like Diamond Jenness (1964) were quick to predict that Inuit culture was facing extinction, Inuit political activism was already emerging.

Rejuvenation of culture

In the 1960s, the Canadian government funded the establishment of secular, government-operated high schools in the Northwest Territories (including what is now Nunavut) and Inuit areas in Quebec and Labrador along with the residential school system. The Inuit population was not large enough to support a full high school in every community, so this meant only a few schools were built, and students from across the territories were boarded there. These schools, in Aklavik, Iqaluit, Yellowknife, Inuvik and Kuujjuaq, brought together young Inuit from across the Arctic in one place for the first time, and exposed them to the rhetoric of civil and human rights that prevailed in Canada in the 1960s. This was a real wake-up call for the Inuit, and it stimulated the emergence of a new generation of young Inuit activists in the late 1960s who came forward and pushed for respect for the Inuit and their territories.

The Inuit began to emerge as a political force in the late 1960s and early 1970s, shortly after the first graduates returned home. They formed new politically active associations in the early 1970s, starting with the Inuit Tapirisat of Canada (Inuit Brotherhood and today known as Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami), an outgrowth of the Indian and Eskimo Association of the 60s, in 1971, and more region specific organisations shortly afterwards, including the Committee for the Original People's Entitlement (representing the Inuvialuit), [88] the Northern Quebec Inuit Association (Makivik Corporation) and the Labrador Inuit Association (LIA) representing Northern Labrador Inuit. Since the
mid-1980s the Southern Labrador Inuit of Nunatukavut began organizing politically after being geographically cut out of the LIA, however, for political expediency the organization was erroneously called the Labrador Metis Nation. NunatuKavummuit are Inuit. These various activist movements began to change the direction of Inuit society in 1975 with the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement. This comprehensive land claims settlement for Quebec Inuit, along with a large cash settlement and substantial administrative autonomy in the new region of Nunavik, set the precedent for the settlements to follow. The northern Labrador Inuit submitted their land claim in 1977, although they had to wait until 2005 to have a signed land settlement establishing Nunatsiavut. Southern Labrador Inuit of Nunatukavut are currently in the process of establishing land claims and title rights that would allow them to negotiate with the Newfoundland Government.

In 1982, the Tunngavik Federation of Nunavut (TFN) was incorporated, in order to take over negotiations for land claims on behalf of the Inuit living in the eastern Northwest Territories, that would later become Nunavut, from the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, which became a joint association of the Inuit of Quebec, Labrador and the Northwest Territories.

Land claims settlements

The Inuvialuit are western Canadian Inuit who remained in the Northwest Territories when Nunavut split off. They live primarily in the Mackenzie River delta, on Banks Island, and parts of Victoria Island in the Northwest Territories. They are officially represented by the Inuvialuit Regional Corporation and, in 1984, received a comprehensive land claims settlement, the first in Northern Canada, with the signing of the Inuvialuit Final Agreement.

The TFN worked for ten years and, in September 1992, came to a final agreement with the Government of Canada. This agreement called for the separation of the Northwest Territories into an eastern territory whose aboriginal population would be predominately Inuit, the future Nunavut, and a rump Northwest Territories in the west. It was the largest land claims agreement in Canadian history. In November 1992, the Nunavut Final Agreement was approved by nearly 85% of the Inuit of what would become Nunavut. As the final step in this long process, the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement was signed on May 25, 1993, in Iqaluit by Prime Minister Brian Mulroney and by Paul Quassa, the president of Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated, which replaced the TFN with the ratification of the Nunavut Final Agreement. The Canadian Parliament passed the supporting legislation in June of the same year, enabling the 1999 establishment of Nunavut as a territorial entity.

With the establishment of Nunatsiavut in 2005, almost all the traditional Inuit lands in Canada, with the exception NunatuKavut in central and South Labrador, are now covered by some sort of land claims agreement providing for regional autonomy.

Inuit communities in Canada continue to suffer under crushing unemployment, overcrowded housing, substance abuse, crime, violence and suicide. The problems Inuit face in the 21st century should not be underestimated. However, many Inuit are upbeat about the future. Arguably, their situation is better than it has been since the 14th century. Inuit arts, carving, print making, textiles and throat singing, are very popular, not only in Canada but globally, and Inuit artists are widely known. Indeed, Canada has, metaphorically, adopted some of the Inuit culture as a sort of national identity, using Inuit symbols like the inukshuk in unlikely places, such as its use as a symbol at the 2010 Winter Olympics in Vancouver. Respected art galleries display Inuit art, the largest collection of which is at the Winnipeg Art Gallery. Some Inuit languages such as Inuktitut, appears to have a more secure future in Quebec and Nunavut. There are a surprising number of Inuit, even those who now live in urban centres such as Ottawa, Montreal and Winnipeg, who have experienced living on the land in the traditional life style. People such as Legislative Assembly of Nunavut member, Levinia Brown and former Commissioner of Nunavut and the NWT, Helen Maksagak were born and lived the early part of their life "on the land". Inuit culture is alive and vibrant today in spite of the negative impacts of recent history.
Inuit cabinet members

On October 30, 2008, Leona Aglukkaq was appointed as Minister of Health, "[becoming] the first Inuk to hold a senior cabinet position, although she is not the first Inuk to be in cabinet altogether."[91] Jack Anawak and Nancy Karetak-Lindell were both parliamentary secretaries respectively from 1993–96 and in 2003.

Greenland

The Thule people arrived in Greenland in the 13th century. There they encountered the Norsemen, who had established colonies there since the late 10th century, as well as a later wave of the Dorset people. Because most of Greenland is covered in ice, the Greenland Inuit (or Kalaallit) only live in coastal settlements, particularly the northern polar coast, the eastern Amassalik coast and the central coasts of western Greenland.[92] In 1953, Denmark put an end to the colonial status of Greenland and granted home rule in 1979 and in 2008 a self-government referendum was passed with 75% approval. Although a part of the Kingdom of Denmark, Greenland, known as Kalaallit Nunaat, maintains much autonomy today. Of a population of 55,000, 80% of Greenlanders identify as Inuit. Their economy is based on fishing and shrimping.[93]

Alaska

The Inuit of Alaska are the Inupiat (from Inuit- people - and piaq/piat real, i.e. 'real people') who live in the Northwest Arctic Borough, the North Slope Borough and the Bering Straits region. Barrow, the northernmost city in the United States, is in the Inupiat region. Their language is Iñupiaq (which is the singular form of Inupiat).

International issues

In recent years, circumpolar cultural and political groups like the Inuit Circumpolar Council have come together to promote the Inuit and other northern people and to fight against ecological problems, such as climate change, which disproportionately affects the Inuit population. Global warming may cause Arctic mammal populations to decline. However, a study by Mitch Taylor, polar bear biologist with the Government of Nunavut, shows that, contrary to the dire predictions, eleven of thirteen polar bear populations have remained stable or increased. The study also shows that the number of polar bears in western Hudson Bay is decreasing due to the effect of global warming, while the decrease of the population in Baffin Bay is directly associated with the over hunting of the bears by Greenland hunters.[94] [95] [96]

Modern culture

Well-known Inuit politicians include Premier of Nunavut, Eva Aariak, Nancy Karetak-Lindell, former MP for the riding of Nunavut, and Leona Aglukkaq, current MP and Federal Health Minister since 2008.[97]

An important biennial event, the Arctic Winter Games, is held in communities across the northern regions of the world, featuring traditional Inuit and northern sports as part of the events. A cultural event is also held. The games were first held in 1970, and while rotated usually among Alaska, Yukon and the Northwest Territories, they have also been held in Schefferville, Quebec in 1976, in Slave Lake, Alberta, and a joint Iqaluit, Nunavut-Nuuk, Greenland staging in 2002.

In other sporting events, Jordin Tootoo became the first Inuk to play in the National Hockey League in the 2003-04 season, playing for the Nashville Predators.
Inuit art such as soapstone carvings is one of Nunavut's most important industries. In 2006, Cape Dorset was hailed as Canada's most artistic city, with 23% of the labour force employed in the arts. One of the most famous Inuit artists is Pitseolak Ashoona. Susan Aglukark is a popular singer. Mitiarjuk Attasie Nappaaluk works at preserving Inuktitut and has written the first novel published in that language.

In recent years, there has been an identity struggle among the younger generations of Inuit, between their traditional heritage and the modern society which their cultures have been forced to assimilate into in order to maintain a livelihood. With current dependence on modern society for necessities, the Inuit have had much interaction with and exposure to the societal norms outside their previous cultural boundaries. The stressors regarding the identity crisis among teenagers have led to disturbingly high numbers of suicide.

A series of authors has focused upon the increasing myopia in the youngest generations of Inuit. Myopia was almost unknown prior to the Inuit adoption of western culture. This phenomenon is also seen in other cultures (for example, Vanuatu). Principal theories are the change to a western style diet with more refined foods, and extended education.

Notes

[1] Hessel, pg. 9
[19] Ivar Bárbarson
[86] Parker 1996:32
[92] Hessel, pg. 11
[93] Hessel, p. 20
[95] CBC News (http://www.cbc.ca/canada/story/2005/06/09/polar050609.html), Nunavut rethinks polar bear quotas as numbers drop, Last Updated: June 9, 2005
[99] Northern resident helps bridge the gap between cultures (http://www.thefreelibrary.com/Northern+resident+helps+bridge+the+gap+between+cultures:+Mitiarjuk,...a030540281).

References


External links

Inuit (http://www.dmoz.org/Society/Ethnicity/The_Americas/Indigenous/Inuit/) at the Open Directory Project
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