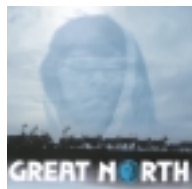


Chapter 4



presented by



The Inuit

GOALS

Getting to know the Inuit people

Discovering the oral traditions of the Inuit

Understanding the links between the Inuit,
the natural world and the caribou

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THE INUIT, YESTERDAY AND TODAY

Who are the Inuit?

If there is anyone on Earth deserving the title “people of the cold,” it’s the Inuit. Once known as Eskimos¹, they are now referred to as Inuit — the name they have always used to describe themselves. In their language, Inuit means simply “the people.” The Inuit number approximately 145,000 people. They live in communities scattered throughout north-eastern Russia (the Chukotsky peninsula), northern Alaska, all of northern Canada and the coastal regions of Greenland.



Although they share a common past, the status of the Inuit varies from one region to another. In Quebec, the territory the Inuit inhabit is called Nunavik² (which means “our land”). The Inuit of Nunavik have a similar status to other Quebecers, but they also benefit from the James Bay Northern Quebec Agreement — which gives them exclusive hunting and fishing rights over part of the territory and financial compensation in exchange for territorial rights. The recent creation of the territory of Nunavut³ in Canada’s eastern Arctic is a milestone in Inuit history, giving the Inuit more control over their own future.

Twenty thousand years of experience have made the Inuit and their forefathers true masters of the art of survival in the Arctic climate. Their entire culture has been forged not in fire, but by cold: their sense of sharing, unique spiritual practices, rich oral tradition and knowledge of the environment are the result of thousands of years of adaptation to their surroundings.

In *Great North*, the Inuit people are represented by Adamie Inukpuk and his family and by the voices of women practicing katajak or throat-singing. Inuit traditional culture has not disappeared. Far from it. But for the most part, the Inuit live in settlements now and not solely off the land. They work at a range of jobs: manager of the local co-op store, for instance, or bush pilot flying visitors out over the tundra to see the caribou.



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Inuksuk

In an immense, white territory, with few landmarks, getting oriented and finding fishing and hunting grounds is no easy task. So the Inuit invented the inukshuk. These inukshuit (inukshuk is the singular, and inukshuit the plural) are piles of rocks, sometimes in a human form. Whether used as a marker, tool of the caribou hunt, food cache or even grave marker, each inukshuk tells the story of the humans who have passed by that spot — a story that speaks to those who know how to read this writing in rocks.

The Inuit still depend on landmarks to find their way, and sometimes they still use inukshuit for this purpose. But topographical maps, satellite positioning systems and compasses are far more common tools for helping them get around in the North.

Where did the Inuit come from?

Archaeological digs seem to indicate that the Inuit are descendants of an ancient people known as the Thule. The Thule people originated in the coastal region of the Bering and Chukchi seas, off northern Alaska, and likely arrived in the islands of Canada's Arctic 600 to 1,000 years ago. They excelled at hunting marine mammals — especially the bowhead whale. These creatures, which are 15 metres long and weigh 50 000 kilograms (110,230 pounds), were hunted from craft known as umiak.

The Thule gradually moved eastward in search of new sources of food and a more amenable environment. Their journeys eventually took them across to all of the Canadian Arctic coast and islands and onward all the way to Greenland. Wherever they went, they brought with them new tools, such as the dogsled. This theory still leaves a number of questions unanswered. The regions that the Thule moved into were already populated by the Dorset people. Did the two peoples ever encounter each other? Was there conflict between them? The Dorset, who the Inuit refer to as Tunit, were known for their spirituality and their ability as sculptors — and they were probably the creators of the igloo. What happened to them? Why did they disappear? For now, we have no answers.

What are some examples of Inuit adaptation to life in the Arctic?

The igloo is perhaps the most famous symbol of adaptation to life in the Arctic — but it is also a symbol of the past. However, many other ingenious accommodations to this harsh climate are still in evidence today. The Inuit invented the dogsled (called qamutik). Today, it's more likely to be hauled behind a snowmobile than pulled by dogs — but it's as useful as ever. Interest in huskies (Eskimo dogs) continues to grow as northern sports and tourism become more popular. The kayak, once used for hunting, is now a mainstay of paddlesports.

Innovations still take place in the Arctic. Homes in northern communities are built without foundations. They rest on posts sheltered from the permafrost, which could damage them as the topsoil freezes and thaws. Regular plumbing is impossible, since the pipes would freeze. Each municipality provides drinking water and sewage removal by truck. The Inuit have changed their way of life dramatically because of contact with the modern world. In only 100 years, they have had to get up to speed with a civilization that took thousands of years to develop to its current state. Inuit ingenuity has helped see them through these turbulent times. For instance, you may hear about an Inuit fisherman repairing a fancy new fishing reel with a carefully carved piece of caribou antler, or about throat singers on a sold-out European tour.

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What roles do the Inuit play in their communities today?

Think of a traditional Inuit family as a small business in which everyone played a crucial part. A hunter could not go hunting for days on end without clothing made of caribou and seal skin, carefully sewn by the family's women and girls. Without their efforts, he would die of cold. Women collected eggs, mussels and seaweed. Whole families worked together fishing — building weirs to trap arctic char as they returned to fresh water at the end of summer. The fish were of critical importance to feeding the family before the onset of winter, and everyone helped out catching, cleaning and storing them.



Everybody also pitched in to prepare the summer camp (a tent or a shelter built partly underground), as well as the winter igloo. Everyone took part in spiritual practices involving a shaman, whose role it was to mediate between the visible and invisible worlds. Through the shaman, spirits could let their wishes be known to hunters and decide the fate of those who had transgressed the community's cultural values.

Today, with the spread of market economics and with access to services from the south, Inuit roles have become more diversified.

Now you can find Inuit pilots and police officers, for example. While greater contact with the south may have brought some benefit to the Inuit, it has also meant the disruption of traditional ways of life. Furthermore, the introduction of Christianity has caused many to forget Inuit spirituality. Christianity has become a permanent part of Inuit culture, but there has been a resurgence of interest in traditional spirituality in the last few years.

LANGUAGE AND TRADITIONS

What language do the Inuit speak?

The Inuktitut language — a member of the Eskimo-Aleut family of languages — lies at the heart of Inuit culture. There are five different types of Inuktitut spoken in the territory stretching from Alaska to Greenland: two in Alaska, two in Canada and one in Greenland. In addition to these languages, there are many dialects and regionalisms. As a result of thousands of years of isolation, certain languages may share only a few words.

Today, the use of Inuktitut varies from one region to another. In areas where it is part of daily life, the Inuit have adapted it by adding words reflecting current realities. The Inuit did not have a written language until one was developed by an Anglican missionary, the Reverend E.J. Peck. He introduced a syllabic guide, which at first numbered 45 symbols, in 1885.

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A Small Inuit Lexicom

Alone with your Inuit guide one day on a fishing trip? Here are some words to help you out.

Thank you **Nakurmiik**

Water **Imak**

Hello **Ai**

Snow **Aputik**

Salmon **Anaaliq**

Goodbye **Atsunai**

How are you? **Qanuikkiit**



This system of writing is based on the sounds of syllables in the Inuit language, and is in use primarily in the Eastern Arctic (with the exception of Greenland).

With aboriginal languages around the world endangered, great efforts have been made to preserve the Inuit language, including teaching it in school and using it in public. New Inuktitut words have appeared, to reflect new realities. Inuktitut dictionaries and magazines are being published. And Inuit translators and public speakers help link the North with the rest of the world. In Quebec (Canada), for instance, Inuktitut is the main language of education from Grade 3 on. Students then choose either English or French as a second language.

What role does oral tradition play in Inuit culture?

Oral tradition is absolutely essential to Inuit culture. Legends, songs (including throat-singing), conversations around a freshly hunted seal and meetings of community members are only a few of the manifestations of Inuit oral culture. Television, newspapers (such as the Nunatsiaq News) and the Internet are recent expressions of Inuit culture — along with local and international events, conferences, festivals and the Arctic Winter International Games, a colder version of the Olympics!

Local radio is also very important. Every community in the North has its own local radio station. Serving as a direct link among members of the community, these stations broadcast music, news and greetings; they are an up-to-date example of oral culture in action. For their part, the elders feel bound to transmit their own stories, values, language and art to the youth of their communities — either at family events or through the schools. Tales and legends convey current and past events, heroic exploits and mythology. Through them, future generations will learn about their culture and spirituality, along with its values. Part of this process includes learning timeless arts like igloo building, hunting techniques and ways to survive on the tundra.

Inuit artists and artisans in many fields (such as music, painting and sculpture) continue to innovate while remaining true to their culture. Throat-singing and soapstone culture have become easily recognizable symbols of the North — valued around the world for the glimpse they offer into a radically different culture, as well as for their quality and style.

RELATIONSHIP WITH NATURE

What kind of relationship do the Inuit have with the natural world?

For most of their history, the Inuit have depended on animals for their survival. Their diet and clothing came almost entirely from animal sources — not surprising, given the rarity of edible plants in the Far North. The bearded seal offered

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waterproof skin ideal for boots; caribou pelts and eider down made for excellent coats; walrus ivory served for tool handles and sacred objects.

As a result, the Inuit developed a deep respect for the natural world; their values and beliefs always reflect the close and fragile relationship between humans and the natural world. If he respected nature, an Inuit hunter would be able to harvest a caribou or seal for his community. On the other hand, a disrespectful hunter might suffer terribly or even die as a result of his actions.

Today, the Inuit have become defenders of their environment — an environment that captivates those who visit the region, whether they come as ecotourists⁴ or explorers — or film-makers! Even though access to goods and services from the south is now easy, they do not come cheaply. The cost of shipping (by boat or plane) generally triples their price. So the land remains of crucial importance to Inuit culture. Subsistence hunting⁵, fishing and collecting sea-bird eggs are still important food sources for many.



What is the relationship between the Inuit and the caribou?

Caribou are in constant migration between the tundra and taiga, so their role in Inuit life is sporadic, but nevertheless extremely important. In the past, caribou represented a renewable source of pelts, meat, bone and antlers — all essential for making tools and clothing that could be used throughout the year.

Caribou pelt was highly prized for its insulating qualities. Even in this age of high-performance synthetic fabrics, it remains one of the best materials available for warding off the cold.

Although manufactured goods such as knives, rifles and needles are now readily available for purchase in the North, caribou continue to play an important role in Inuit culture. They remain an important food source, of course, but their influence runs far deeper. For instance, the traditional Inuit calendar does not feature holidays like Halloween or Valentine's Day. Instead, you will find Nurraliut (caribou birth), Akunnaituq (the time when caribou pelts are perfect for making clothing) and Amirajaut (shedding of caribou antlers). And in traditional astronomy, the Big Dipper is seen not as the Great Bear, but as tukturjuk, a name related to tuktu, the Inuit word for caribou.

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Glossary

¹ **Eskimo:**

An old word used to describe the Inuit. It comes from the American Indian Montagnais tribe, who called the Inuit Estmeow — meaning others, or strangers. The word was quickly adopted by European visitors in the Gulf of St. Lawrence. It remained in usage until recently. Today, the word Inuit is more accepted, although Eskimo is still widely used in the United States.

² **Nunavik:**

Region of northern Quebec (Canada), covering an area of approximately 500 000 square kilometres (193,050 square miles). Nunavik is primarily inhabited by Inuit living in 14 coastal communities.

³ **Nunavut:**

Inuit territory located in the Canadian North. Nunavut was formally established on April 1, 1999, and is administered by a territorial government. The capital is Iqaluit. Baffin, Ellesmere and Devon islands are among its best-known regions.

⁴ **Ecotourism:**

A range of tourist activities (such as sports, birding and photo safaris) that take place in a natural setting, while respecting the environment.

⁵ **Subsistence:**

Staple supplies and objects allowing individuals to meet their basic needs.

Activity

Playing Inuit

Goal:

Becoming familiar with aspects of Inuit culture.

Material:

Ruler or tape measure (optional)

Note:

This activity requires adult supervision!

Directions:

1. Explain to participants that games play an important role in Inuit culture. They were traditionally used to practice skills or while away time in the igloo while a storm raged outside. Many games, like this one, involve physical endurance.
2. Divide the group into teams of four each.
3. One member of each team lies face down on the ground in a cross shape — feet together and arms outstretched. One of the other team members stands by the feet, while the others stand beside each arm.
4. The participants standing by the arms lift them by grasping the wrists. The person standing by the feet grasps the ankles. Together, the three slowly lift the person on the ground 15 to 20 centimetres (6 to 8 inches) off the ground. The person being lifted must keep arms and legs straight and not touch the ground.
5. The three “carriers” walk forward slowly until the person being carried has to bend his or her arms or legs.
6. Everyone returns to the starting point and switches roles, letting everyone take a turn at this demanding exercise.
7. You can also measure the distance each team travels if you like.

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Let's Explore Some More:

8. As a group, read the different letters and symbols (below) that make up the Inuit language. The symbols represent letters of the Roman alphabet (which we use in English) and are called syllabics.

	a	u	i
p	pa	pu	pi
v	va	vu	vi
t	ta	tu	ti
j	ja	ju	ji
r	ra	ru	ri
l	la	lu	li
n	na	nu	ni
g	ga	gu	gi
k	ka	ku	ki
m	ma	mu	mi
y	ya	yu	yi
s	sa	su	si
q	qa	qu	qi
ng	nga	ngu	ngi
	a	u	i

9. Using syllabics, write the following words:

Example: **Nanuq:** (pronounced "nanook," meaning white bear)

1. **Aput:** _____ "apoot" snow

2. **Tuktu:** _____ "tooktoo" caribou

3. **Ai:** _____ "ai" hi

4. **Nakurmiik:** _____ "nakourmic" thank you

5. **Qajaq:** _____ "kayak" kayak

6. **Qajajuq:** _____ "kaya-ooyook" straightening up with a quick paddle stroke after having capsized in a kayak.

7. Try writing your own name using syllabics: _____

Solutions on page 9

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Questions:

Does an Inuit hunter have to wait a long time before being able to capture a seal? Have you ever had to wait a long time for someone or something? What did you feel while you were waiting?

What is unique about Inuit culture? What culture do you come from? In what ways does it differ from Inuit culture?

Over time, how have the Inuit adapted to the cold climate? Have you ever had to adapt to cold conditions? What did you do?

Why did the Inuit need physical games? Do you know any games that help keep you in good shape? Do you need games to become more alert or stronger?

SOLUTIONS: 1. 2. 3. 4. 5. 6.

Note to group leaders:

Some answers may differ from those shown in the solutions, but may still sound correct. Not to worry — your groups just need to brush up on their Inuktitut grammar!

Resources

CD-ROM

Land of the Inuit: An Exploration of the Arctic. Co-produced by the Canadian Museum of Civilization and Édirom Inc. Published by Ingenuity Works, Inc. ISBN: 2920718681

BOOKS

Morrison, David and Georges-Hébert Germain. **Inuit: Glimpses of an Arctic Past.** Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1996. ISBN: 0660140381. 159 p.

WEB SITES

Official site of the **Government of Nunavut:** www.nunavut.com

Avataq Cultural Institute: www.avataq.qc.ca

Inuit Circumpolar Conference: www.inusiaat.com

Nunatsiaq News: www.nunatsiaq.com