Inuit History Backgrounder

Who are Inuit?

Inuit, an Inuktitut term that means "the people," are the Indigenous people of the Arctic. "Inuit" is a plural noun that refers to a group of people, while the singular "Inuk" refers to one person. Their homeland, known as Inuit Nunangat, includes Nunavut, Inuvialuit (the Northwest Territories and Yukon), Nunavik (Northern Quebec), and Nunatsiavut (Labrador). Inuit have a close relationship with the land, which traditionally provided food, clothing, and shelter. Until about 1950, most Inuit families lived in close-knit kinship groups of five to thirty people, moving seasonally using dog teams or boats and following the animals they hunted and fished.

Inuit and *Qallunaat*

There is a long history of interaction between Inuit and *qallunaat* (an Inuktitut term for people of non-Inuit ancestry) in the Canadian Arctic. In the 10th century, Inuit first encountered European peoples when Norse explorer Erik the Red's voyage from Iceland reached Newfoundland and Labrador. Settlements established by the Norse in Canada were abandoned soon after this first encounter, and it was not until the late 15th century, when European explorers began arriving in North America, that Inuit began to interact with *qallunaat* again. Contact between Inuit and Europeans began to increase in the 18th and 19th centuries, as Europeans hunted whales and traded furs in the Arctic. Inuit were hired to guide whaling ships, and they often traded items from their own hunts, such as caribou meat or fish, with the whaling and hunting crews, who offered European goods like knives, rifles, tobacco, and food. Fur traders encouraged Inuit to trap foxes, which could also be traded for European goods. At the same time, Christian missionaries from Europe provided medical services and education to Inuit and encouraged them to convert to Christianity.

This contact with whalers, traders, and missionaries had a significant impact on Inuit lifestyles as Inuit adapted to the introduction of an exchange economy and European goods. The presence of Europeans also introduced new diseases to the North, including tuberculosis and polio. At the same time, Inuit maintained important aspects of their traditional lifestyle and relationships with the land, visiting permanent *qallunaat* settlements once or twice per year to trade.

Throughout this time period, the Canadian government had little presence in the North. This changed, however, with the collapse of the fur trade and a historic low in the caribou population in the 1930s, which led to widespread starvation among the Inuit. Federal and provincial governments provided some assistance to Inuit, but were soon preoccupied with the Second World War, from 1939 to 1945.

With the end of the Second World War and beginning of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union, Canada became more interested in the North. The shortest air route for nuclear weapons between the two opponents was over the North Pole, which led Canada to become concerned about its sovereignty (the power of the government) and security in the Arctic. At the same time, following the social and economic upheavals of the Depression and the Second

World War, Canadian governments began expanding the state's role to improve (it hoped) the lives of Canadians. This took the form of social programs like family allowances, old age pensions, and funding for health care and education. Under the direction of the federal government, this "welfare state" model expanded to the North. With the introduction of government-funded schools and housing in the North in the 1950s, and the government's attempts to encourage Inuit to work in industries like mining instead of living on the land, Inuit were encouraged to settle in sedentary communities that could be easily accessed by people from the South. As the Qikiqtani Inuit Association notes, these new interventions led to "rapid and dramatic" change for the Inuit. It was "not a gradual progression from a traditional to a modern way of life, but a complete transformation."

The Loss of *Qimmiit*

Sled dogs, known in Inuktitut as *qimmiit*, were a significant part of traditional Inuit culture and daily life. As Inuit travelled long distances between camps, dog teams pulled hunters, equipment, packs, and game. They also protected their owners from predators and helped them find their way home in severe weather conditions. From the 1950s to the 1970s, as more and more Inuit settled in sedentary communities, the number of *qimmiit* in the North declined dramatically. Many dogs were abandoned before Inuit moved into settlements, because they were not allowed to bring them or would not have a use for them. Many dogs were also killed by Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) officers, as they were thought to be a danger and a source of disease in settlements. (Sytukie Joamie describes the impact of such a slaughter of dogs in the Lost Stories film, *Qamutiik*.) For many Inuit, the loss of their *qimmiit* meant that they could not return to the mobility of their traditional lifestyles. For the RCMP, this lack of mobility made the Inuit easier to police.

Education

Inuit children learn skills through observation, practice, and experience as knowledge of the environment, beliefs, and customs are passed down through generations. Beginning in the early 20th century, Anglican and Catholic missionaries also taught Inuit to read and write in Inuktitut syllabics, English, or French, and had some influence on Inuit spiritual beliefs. It was not until the Canadian federal government decided to take over schooling in the North in the 1940s, however, that educational institutions began to have a significant impact on the daily lives of Inuit.

By 1950, the Canadian government had removed the influence of churches in Northern schools and established eight schools in the Northwest Territories (including what is now Nunavut) and Northern Quebec, with the goal of teaching Inuit skills the government believed they needed in order to be assimilated into the Canadian economy. Although the first programs were day schools, the long distance between Inuit settlements and the seasonal mobility of Inuit groups made it difficult to maintain school attendance. In 1954, a report by the Subcommittee on Eskimo Education, part of the federal government's Department of Northern Affairs and National Resources, argued that "the residential school is perhaps the most effective way of giving children from primitive environments experience in education along the lines of civilization leading to vocational training to fit them for occupations in the white man's economy."

Residential schools, which removed Indigenous children from the care of their parents and communities to be taught European and Christian values, had existed in Canada since the 1830s. However, it was not until 1939 that Inuit were considered "Indians" and therefore became the administrative responsibility of the Canadian federal government, and this explains why none of these schools had yet been established in the North. From 1955 to 1964, the number of school-aged Inuit children attending residential schools increased from less than 15 percent to over 75

percent. Parents were coerced to send children to residential schools by RCMP officers, who threatened to suspend the parents' family allowances (government benefits for families) or to imprison those who refused to give up their children.

Many of these residential school students only saw their parents once a year. Others were so far away from their homes – sometimes in other provinces and territories – that they did not see their families for years at a time. Students were punished for speaking their language or practicing their culture at the schools, as the Canadian government attempted to assimilate them into a "Canadian" way of life. Many students experienced mental, physical, and sexual abuse while they attended the schools. Although Prime Minister Stephen Harper apologized to Survivors of residential schools on behalf of the Government of Canada in 2008, the intergenerational impacts of residential schools are still being felt in Indigenous communities today.

Since the 1960s and 1970s, many Inuit students have travelled to urban centres in the South to attend universities and colleges. This has been a difficult experience for some Inuit, as they have had to make the transition from living in rural communities in the North to living in large cities like Toronto, Montreal, and Ottawa.

Health Care and Medical Evacuations

In the 1940s and 1950s, some of the first Inuit to travel south did so for medical treatment. Diseases like tuberculosis (TB), a contagious respiratory infection, spread rapidly among the Inuit. Instead of building properly equipped medical facilities in the North, the Canadian government reacted to high mortality rates among Inuit by sending those who were ill to hospitals and sanitoria (centres for the treatment of TB) in the South. Medical patrol ships would travel to the Arctic, screen Inuit for TB and other illnesses, and force those who were infected to remain on the ship, often without saying goodbye to their families. They would then be transported to hospitals in the South. By 1956, one in seven Inuit were being treated in Southern hospitals.

After weeks on board the ship, Inuit would spend months or years at treatment facilities in Southern cities. Poor record-keeping and the inability of hospital staff to speak Inuktitut sometimes meant that Inuit patients were returned to the wrong communities, never reuniting with their families. For some patients who were taken away as children, the loss of years of traditional teachings and language sometimes meant they were unable to communicate with their families upon their return. Some families of patients who died while receiving treatment in the South were never informed of their loved ones' deaths.

High Arctic Relocations

The Cold War-era concern for Canadian sovereignty in the Arctic, combined with a concern about the availability of resources in some areas of the North, motivated the Canadian government to conceive of an "experiment" to determine whether Inuit could be relocated to new communities.
In 1950, planning began for the relocation of ten Inuit families from Inukjuak (in Northern Quebec) and Pond Inlet to communities on Ellesmere Island, in the High Arctic. The reasons for this move were not clearly communicated to the families and, in an attempt to claim authority over a wider area of the North, the families were split up among several different communities. When they arrived in the High Arctic in 1953, the relocatees found that the living conditions were extremely different from their home communities, with colder temperatures, months of darkness or light, a different landscape, and different wildlife on Ellesmere Island. The government did not provide adequate supplies or housing, nor did it honour promises that the relocatees could return to Northern Quebec if they requested to do so.

In 1993, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples investigated the 1953 relocations, hearing testimonies from the Inuit who were part of the relocation and their descendants. The Commission

concluded that although the Government had attempted to do what it thought was best for these families, the relocations were not well planned and had been misrepresented to the Inuit to gain their agreement.

Urbanization and the Growth of Inuit Communities in the South

Since the mid-20th century, as a result of the transformation of life in the Arctic, the number of Inuit living in urban communities in Southern Canada has been steadily rising. Inuit move to cities for a variety of reasons, including medical treatment, post-secondary education, employment, and to reunite with family. While some Inuit travel south temporarily, others move permanently, and many are born and raised in the south. Some also move south because of a lack of employment, resources, or housing in their home communities. While newcomers to urban spaces encounter challenges, including language barriers, marginalization or discrimination, or difficulty accessing services because of cultural differences, urban Inuit have also built vibrant communities in the South. Organizations and community centres founded by Inuit have thrived in cities like Ottawa, Winnipeg, Edmonton, and St. John's, demonstrating the resiliency of Inuit culture. These organizations provide services and events that allow those coming from the North to maintain their sense of community, and allow those who were born in the South to learn more about Inuit heritage, traditions, and culture. Through interaction with these Inuit-run community organizations, Inuit in the South have formed a distinct "urban Inuk" identity that is connected to Northern Inuit culture but is also integrated into a Southern, urban environment.