

# Use of Traditional Inuit Culture in the Policies and Organization of the Government of Nunavut

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## Abstract

Beginning in the 1950s, the Government of Canada employed a variety of means to encourage Inuit settlement in established communities. By 1970, most Inuit had adopted a sedentary lifestyle that, of necessity, involved accommodation to elements of southern Canadian culture. Inuit experienced profound social, cultural and economic changes between 1950 and 1970. As more Inuit participated in the wage economy, and lived in houses or attended federal schools provided by the federal government, their lifestyle shifted from their traditional social and cultural practices (*Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit*). This paper explores how the Government of Nunavut has used *Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit* to implement traditional Inuit social and cultural practices as operational policy within the government structure.

**Keywords:** Nunavut, Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit, Traditional Knowledge

## Introduction

The traditional subsistence strategy practiced by Inuit and their Arctic predecessors required a semi-nomadic way of life based on the seasonal availability of various natural resources. Their seasonal movements limited their contact with non-Inuit, ensuring retention of the traditional social and cultural practices that were entwined with their land use practices. The high degree of mobility required for traditional Inuit subsistence necessitated that information transfer was primarily oral, including the culturally-based

body of knowledge called *Inuit Qaujimaqatuqangit*<sup>1</sup>, which is also known today as “IQ” in the eastern Arctic Territory of Nunavut.

IQ was defined by the Government of Nunavut’s IQ Task Force in its first annual report as “the Inuit way of doing things: the past, present and future knowledge, experience and values of Inuit society,” as expressed through several primary relationship and principles (INUIT QAUJIMAJATUQANGINNUT TASK FORCE 2002: 4). According to the task force, the principles of IQ are: serving and providing for family and community (*Pijitsirniq*), decision making “through observation or taking counsel” (*Ajiiqatigiingniq*), transferring skills and knowledge through observation and practice (*Pilnimmaksarniq*), “collaborative working relationships” (*Piliriqatigiingniq*), “environmental stewardship” (*Avatittinnik Kamattiarniq*), and “being resourceful to solve problems” (*Qanuqtuurniq*). The primary relationships through which these principles find expression are: the relationship of the individual to the land (and culture because the relationship with the land is the basis of the culture), the relationship of one to their family, the relationship of the individual to their self (or inner Spirit), and the relationship of one to their peers (or the social group) (INUIT QAUJIMAJATUQANGINNUT TASK FORCE 2002: 4-6).

Since 1950, Inuit have experienced profound changes in their way of life, including their degree of residential mobility, their subsistence strategy, and their method of educating youth. I focus on the eastern Arctic, which is a region inhabited predominantly by Inuit, because the creation of Nunavut Territory in 1999 produced an opportunity for Inuit to take a leading role in defining the policies and organization of the new territory’s government.

## Historical Context

Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, the Canadian Government had little regular contact with Inuit but maintained a policy of encouraging them to follow their traditional way of life insofar as that was possible (DICKERSON 1992: 37-38). During the 1940s and the 1950s, the traditional Inuit way of life appeared arduous to many observers, who reported periodic poor health of Inuit, including respiratory problems caused by traditional methods of heating homes, food shortages and starvation when animal resources were not plentiful, and short life expectancy with high rates of infant mortality (DIUBALDO 1992: 16; DUFFY 1988: 16; ROBERTSON 2000: 118-120).

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<sup>1</sup> Editors' note: suggested translation "Inuit long-standing knowledge still meaningful today." See "Concerning Inuit Orality, introduction to the Proceedings".

Between 1950 and 1970, the Government of Canada initiated large-scale housing construction projects throughout the North, both in strategic locations with sovereignty concerns and in locations frequented by Inuit. Such settlement was intended to facilitate the federal provision of social programs for housing, education, healthcare and economic development that would improve the Inuit standard of living. By 1955, the official policy of the Canadian Government was to ensure that Inuit enjoyed the same rights, privileges and opportunities as other Canadians (DIUBALDO 1992: 30; ROBERTSON 2000: 118-120). Inuit experienced some difficulty with the Canadian Government's school system, which encouraged individual achievement toward future goals, in contrast to Inuit culture's present-orientation and sensitivity to the maintenance of community relations (DUFFY 1988: 106; SIMPSON & WATTIE 1968: 2-4). Although acculturation may not have been an explicit goal, expectations that Inuit would become literate and engaged in wage labour were publicly stated objectives of the Canadian Government (DIUBALDO 1992: 36-38). These objectives implicitly required that Inuit accommodate some elements of the cultural organization and value system of southern Canada, both of which affected the generational transmission, traditional relationships, and community expression associated with IQ.

### **Oral Transmission of Inuit Culture**

Changes in the traditional way of life experienced by Inuit between 1950 and the present have affected the contexts in which IQ is transmitted and how Inuit communities express the relationships and principles associated with IQ.

The relationship of Inuit to the land and to their culture, and the relationship of individuals to their peer group, have been affected by the shift from seasonal residential relocation and a land-based economy to sedentary community life and wage employment. Since the 1970s contemporary Inuit youth in the central Arctic have had an increasingly distant relationship — both geographically and experientially — to the tundra outside of their communities, which is now explored mainly for sport or leisure, rather than for subsistence. With a declining reliance on land-based resources and the consequent decrease in regular land travel, Inuit youth are not exposed to orally transmitted, enculturating land-based knowledge (including geographical, ecological and meteorological knowledge) in the same context or to the same degree as their grandparents (COLLIGNON 2006: 194-195). Similarly, the network of relationships that was orally organized and transmitted between generations, and was central to survival on the land (such as kinship, hunting partners and sharing partners), is not so relevant in contemporary communities where economic subsistence is often an individual pursuit, framed by education level, relevant job experience and personal aptitude (BENNETT & ROWLEY 2004: 86-92).

Changes to the significance of a family units' network of relationships and the age-based division of family members during the day — with children at school and adults at home or elsewhere — has affected the community context and expression for the IQ principles of working through collaborative relationships, decision making through observation and counsel, and resourceful problem solving. Traditional gender and age-based divisions of labour, designed to ensure that complimentary aspects of subsistence activities were fulfilled, are less relevant in a community environment where subsistence is based on receiving a pay cheque and purchasing food, clothing and other necessities at a store. The daily separation of children from adults, and often young adults from their elders, means fewer daily opportunities to observe and receive counsel. The highly specific employment of adults has meant that elder advice and observing elders as a means of learning is relevant to fewer contexts than in the past when most adults of a gender were expected to perform a similar range of tasks. Orientation to sedentary community life, rather than to the land outside of communities, has also affected expression of the IQ principle for serving and providing, which was traditionally done through economic subsistence activities, such as hunting and fishing, and through the preparation of material culture, such as caribou skin clothing or seal skin boots.

With the move to sedentary communities, the primacy of oral communication for knowledge transfer, particularly the transfer of IQ, was displaced by the necessity for Inuit to accommodate more elements of southern Canadian culture. Communities and social services were often administered, at least initially, by non-Inuit who were trained for their jobs in southern Canada or elsewhere, and were unfamiliar with IQ. For example, the government issued booklets like *The Book of Wisdom for Eskimos* in the late 1940s. This book, which included many illustrations, was written in English and Inuktitut syllabics, and was designed to provide instruction on the use and care of government housing and its contents, such as kitchen appliances. It also described southern Canadian approaches to various aspects of community life that the government expected of Inuit, including childcare, hygiene and the legal system (MCNICOLL, TESTER & KULCHYSKI 1999: 199-200). Although the Canadian Government also organized some oral instruction on home care through community housing associations, *The Book of Wisdom for Eskimos* is an early example of the expectation that Inuit would acculturate to a western form of literate communication, rather than relying on programs that communicated knowledge with Inuit through traditional IQ means, such as observation and practice (NIXON 1984: 146-149; RICHARDSON 1976: 101-102; THOMAS & THOMPSON 1972: 11).

## **Creation of the Government of Nunavut**

During the 1960s, Inuit became increasingly concerned about Canadian Government-sponsored development of Northern oil, gas and mineral resources (MCPHERSON 2003: 51). In 1969, the federal government drafted a policy that recommended assimilating Aboriginal peoples in Canada by terminating their status under the *Indian Act*. The threat to the welfare of the Northern environment and access to traditional Inuit lands, the threat to their identity as Aboriginal people in Canada, and the prior establishment of a First Nations' political organization motivated the development of Inuit political organizations beginning in 1970 (DICKERSON 1992: 100; HANRAHAN 2003: 267; HOCHSTEIN 1987: 9; MOREHOUSE 1987: 4; INUIT TAPIIRIT KANATAMI 2005; USHER 1973: 21).

Inuit Tapirisat of Canada (now Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, or ITK), was established in 1971 as the national Inuit organization, primarily to lobby the federal government for involvement in the development of Northern land stretching from the western Arctic to Labrador (MCPHERSON 2003: 57-61; INUIT TAPIIRIT KANATAMI 2005). The founders of ITK were mainly young people, who had been educated at secondary and vocational schools in Churchill, Yellowknife and Ottawa, and were selected for their ability to communicate in English, rather than their superiority in traditional Inuit pursuits (INUIT TAPIIRIT KANATAMI 2004). ITK's claim for a Northern Inuit territory was motivated by several factors, including the need to ensure their stewardship of natural resources; to address the physical remoteness of their territorial government in Yellowknife; to create political structures with the authority to achieve Inuit-defined objectives for social and economic development; and to ensure a formal understanding of Inuit rights with the Canadian Government (INUIT TAPIIRISAT OF CANADA 1979: 4-6). In proposing a system of governance for the Northern territory (to be called Nunavut), ITK wanted to establish a public government within the Canadian federal system that had rights and responsibilities similar to those of the Government of the Northwest Territories (INUIT TAPIIRISAT OF CANADA 1979: 11-15).

In 1977, ITK submitted a comprehensive claim to the Canadian Government that proposed to divide the Northwest Territories, creating Nunavut Territory in the eastern Arctic (MCPHERSON 2003: 69-71). In 1993, the Government of Canada and the Tungavik Federation of Nunavut established the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement in Principle, the Nunavut Political Accord, and the *Nunavut Act*, which led to the creation of Nunavut Territory and the Government of Nunavut on 1 April 1999 (GOVERNMENT OF NUNAVUT 2005).

### ***Inuit Qaujimaqatuqangit***

Between 1993 and 1999, the Nunavut Social Development Council (NSDC) researched and recommended policies related to social and cultural issues for the new Government of Nunavut; a priority was the adoption of IQ as part of the government's operations. In 1998, the NSDC held their first Traditional Knowledge Conference, whose objective was to develop a vision for the recognition, use and promotion of Inuit knowledge to benefit present and future generations. Conference delegates concluded that, at the time, Inuit culture, values and language were not being effectively transmitted to future generations, thereby depriving youth of their cultural heritage, identity, and opportunities to learn valuable life skills. Delegates further concluded that if traditional Inuit knowledge and practices were incorporated into Government of Nunavut policies, communities and government alike would have increasingly effective solutions to contemporary issues, ranging from childcare to wildlife management (NUNAVUT SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT COUNCIL 1998).

In 2001, a member of the NSDC stated the Council's goal to incorporate IQ principles into government without creating a separate policy that would remove IQ from its traditionally dynamic context. The Council's goal was to maintain IQ as the "living technology" that it had been for centuries, as "a means of rationalizing thought and action, a means of organizing tasks and resources, [and] a means of organizing family and society into coherent wholes" (ARNAKAK 2001). The IQ Task Force was created in 2001 and their 2002 report uses the definition of IQ given earlier, namely that IQ is "the past, present *and future* knowledge and values of Inuit society" (INUIT QAUJIMAJATUQANGINNUT TASK FORCE 2002: 4). Although the Government of Nunavut is staffed by many Inuit, the IQ Task Force concluded that departments were struggling to effectively incorporate IQ to their daily activities. Largely, they attributed this difficulty to the government's basic organizational structure (INUIT QAUJIMAJATUQANGINNUT TASK FORCE 2002: 1).

The Government of Nunavut's current organization is modeled on the Government of the Northwest Territories, which grew from the Northwest Territories Council. Beginning in 1905, the Council was administered by appointed civil servants in Ottawa. It became fully elected and moved to Yellowknife in 1967. The Government of Nunavut was created in the North during the 1990s, with the assistance of Inuit and non-Inuit from the Government of the Northwest Territories and southern Canada. Although this was a pragmatic approach for Nunavummiut, it produced a territorial government with a similar organization and culture to other territorial governments in Canada, rather than one that is more reflective of the people who it predominantly serves and governs.



The population of Nunavut is approximately 85% Inuit, and the Government of Nunavut seeks to reflect that proportion of Inuit in its employees. Protection of Inuit culture and language are priorities for the Government of Nunavut, as is reflected in its policies. The 1999 Bathurst Mandate, for example, guides policy development in four areas: Healthy Communities, Simplicity and Unity, Self-Reliance, and Continuous Learning. Each of the four areas includes principles and objectives that refer explicitly and implicitly to IQ as the basis for policy development. The section on Simplicity and Unity, for example, states that, “Simplicity in the processes of government encourages access by all; makes the tasks more focused and more achievable; and invites participation. ...*Inuit Qaujimaqatuqangit* will provide the context in which we develop an open, responsive and accountable government” (GOVERNMENT OF NUNAVUT 1999).

The IQ Task Force concluded that departments were striving to incorporate cultural activities into their daily operations but lacked the knowledge and resources required to conceptualize IQ in ways that facilitated appropriate application. Fundamentally, the Task Force concluded that the Government of Nunavut should be trying to incorporate *itself* into *Inuit culture*, rather than incorporating Inuit culture into the government’s “alien model”. According to the Task Force, the existence of a “corporate culture” within the Government of Nunavut, which was imported with the structure and personnel from the Government of the Northwest Territories and southern Canada, was an impediment to incorporating Inuit culture within the new territorial government (INUIT QAUJIMAJATUQANGINNUT TASK FORCE 2002: 11-14).

By recommending that IQ *not* be made a policy of its own, the Task Force had tried to avoid the fragmentation of Inuit culture to discreet and static parts. By recommending that all Government of Nunavut policies be conceived within the framework of IQ, the Task Force sought to retain IQ relationships and principles as an entwined context for a holistic way of living. Yet, as the Task Force observed many departmental attempts to incorporate Inuit culture were occurring in ways that did not fully consider the traditional contexts of the cultural principles. An afternoon of berry picking with colleagues, for example, gave Inuit an opportunity to engage in a traditional activity but did not necessarily extend to engage colleagues in a way that formed lasting reciprocal relationships. The report concluded that although the Government of Nunavut had established a Task Force, it was using IQ through methods that, intentional or not, subverted the original objectives of the NSDC’s suggestions. To address this situation, the Task Force recommended that the Government of Nunavut use the relationships and principles of IQ to establish an *Inuit corporate culture* that would be the Government of Nunavut’s foundation. To this end, the Task Force recognized that leading members of departments would have to be Inuit or be very familiar with Inuit culture, that the creation of an Inuit corporate culture would have

to be a priority for the entire government, and that extensive consultations with elders would be required (INUIT QAUJIMAJATUQANGINNUT TASK FORCE 2002: 11-14).

Recently, the IQ Task Force has become the Tuttarviit Committee, which is staffed by representatives from each Government of Nunavut department and is advised by an elders' council. The Government of Nunavut is striving to ensure that Inuktitut is its working language and that Tuttarviit representatives have the resources to provide appropriate departmental guidance in ensuring that IQ, and the relationships and principles associated with traditional Inuit ways of living, are integral components of government policy and procedure (INUIT TAPIRISAT OF CANADA: 48-50; ARNAQUQ & PITSIULAK 2005; MIKE & ROJAS 2005). Yet, as Justice Thomas Berger's recent report on the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement's implementation demonstrates, not enough Inuit have attained the levels of education and experience required for upper management roles within their government (BERGER 2006). This lack of upward employment mobility impacts on many issues within Northern communities, including the ability to create an Inuit corporate culture for the Government of Nunavut.

## **Conclusion**

The present needs of Northern communities are remarkably similar to their needs forty years ago, such as housing and economic development, and Inuit efforts to acculturate to sedentary communities while retaining their culture continues.

From the Nunavut Social Development Council's statement of the need to ensure that Inuit knowledge and practices are integral "as a living technology" in the Government of Nunavut's operation and policies, to the IQ Task Force's goal of creating an Inuit corporate culture, Inuit throughout Nunavut have been vocal about the need to have their government and how it operates reflect their culture. For Nunavummiut, significant elements of this include the transmission of knowledge between generations, and the holistic understanding of traditional ways of living and relating to one another. The Government of Nunavut is still quite young, and as Thomas Berger recently pointed out, it continues to require more Inuit with training to act in many of its government's senior positions (BERGER 2006). Until this is the case, the Government of Nunavut will likely continue to operate more according to an 'alien model', rather than with to an Inuit corporate culture.

Inuit involved in Northern politics and governance have emphasized the need to make government and how it operates relevant to the people that it serves, and the importance of incorporating traditions, such as methods of learning, into governing



structures (ARNAQUQ & PITSIULAK 2005; MIKE AND ROJAS 2005). Inuit have repeatedly demonstrated their resilience to survive over the past thousand years, and in the past fifty years have demonstrated the resilience of their culture. As more Inuit become employed in senior positions with the Government of Nunavut, IQ will, no doubt, become an increasingly visible part of the government's operation and policies.

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