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Placing Identity: Town, Land, and Authenticity in Nunavut, Canada

EDMUND (NED) SEARLES

ABSTRACT Recent demographic changes have made settlement patterns in the Canadian Arctic increasingly urban. Iqaluit, capital of Canada’s newest territory, Nunavut, is home to the largest concentration of Inuit and non-Inuit populations in the Canadian North. Despite these trends, Inuit cultural identity continues to rest heavily on the perception that to learn how to be authentically Inuit (or to be a better person), a person needs to spend time out on the land (and sea) hunting, fishing, trapping, and camping. Many Inuit also maintain a rather negative view of urban spaces in the Arctic, identifying them as places where Inuit values and practices have been eclipsed by Qallunaat (“white people”) ones. Some Inuit have even gone so far as to claim that a person is no longer able to be Inuit while living in towns like Iqaluit. This article examines those aspects of Canadian Inuit identity, culture, and tradition that disfavor the acceptance of an urban cultural identity. Based on ethnographic research conducted on Baffin Island in the mid 1990s and early 2000s, the many ways Iqaluit and outpost camp Inuit express the differences and similarities between living on the land and living in town are described. Then follows an examination of how the contrast of land and town is used in the rhetoric of Inuit politicians and leaders. Finally, a series of counterexamples are presented that favor the creation of an authentic urban Inuit identity in the Arctic, including recent attempts on the part of the Nunavut Territorial Government to make education and wage employment in the region more reliant on Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit, or Inuit traditional knowledge.

KEY WORDS: Inuit, Canada, Ethnicity, Place

Introduction

The twin processes of globalization and modernity are often imagined as forces that threaten the ties that bind culture and tradition to specific regions or locales (Jacka, 2005; Inda & Rosaldo, 2008). Anthropologists researching the North American Arctic have a mixed view on the effects of modernization on Inuit culture. For some, access to global markets have damaged certain traditions (e.g. Wenzel, 1991), but strengthened others (Fogel-Chance, 1993; Lee, 2002; Fienup-Riordan et al., 2000; Clifford, 2004; Kishigami, 2006; Dybbro, 2008). Canadian Inuit, too, have a mixed view of the trends of the past half-century that have altered local lifestyles and transformed belief systems. One noticeable trend is a growing culture gap between Inuit from...
large towns and those from outpost camps that I encountered while conducting anthropological fieldwork in southern Baffin Island in the mid 1990s and early 2000s. Specifically, some Inuit contend that real Inuit culture does not and cannot exist in places where so-called Qallunaat (“white people”) institutions and values predominate or co-exist alongside Inuit ones. One such place in particular is Iqaluit, which is home to almost equal numbers of Inuit and Qallunaat (according to the latest census) and is the capital of Nunavut, Canada’s newest territory. In this article I explore the anti-urbanization of Inuit identity and trace its origins in the politics of cultural identity.

In a recent article on Inuit identity, I offered two axioms about the connection between Inuit and place that I encountered in my conversations with Inuit and non-Inuit living in Iqaluit, Canada. The first is that Inuit identity, “to borrow a metaphor from Basso (1996), sits in particular places such that some places nourish one’s Inuit identity (e.g. outpost camps) while other places drain it away (e.g. Iqaluit)” (Searles, 2008: 240). The second is that “the articulation of Inuit identity entails a positive affirmation of Inuit culture and a simultaneous repudiation of Qallunaat [white people’s] culture” (Searles, 2008: 240). According to this interpretive framework, many Inuit believe that larger towns like Iqaluit, Nunavut, where large numbers of Qallunaat live, work, and intermarry with Inuit, are places where Inuit culture and identity are being lost. Conversely, places like outpost camps and smaller settlements, which are thought to exist beyond the influence of Qallunaat culture, are imagined as places where Inuit can learn properly about their culture and heritage.

The literature on Native American culture often stresses the importance of place (and more importantly, the sense of place) in the articulation of Native American identity (e.g. Fogelson, 1998; Brody, 2000; Strong, 2005; Thornton, 2008). This literature also stresses the importance on the positive dimensions of preserving ties to the land and the negative outcomes of losing those ties. For the Apache of Northern Arizona, learning place names is important for the preservation of traditional culture and for the development of psychological maturity and mental acuity. Being on the land not only teaches important aspects of Apache history; it leads to smooth, steady, and resilient minds (Basso, 1996). Being on the land also heals or rehabilitates those whose lives have been wrecked by living in towns, where alcohol, drugs, and domestic violence are everyday realities. Citing one passage in Brody’s ethnographic memoir of his research in Pond Inlet, Nunavut, he writes, “I longed to get out of Pond [Inlet], onto the land, into the places where people hunted, trapped, fished, and said they lived most fully as themselves” (2000: 30).

Equally important to understanding the role of place in sustaining and nurturing indigenous identity is the use of boundaries to demarcate where indigenous identity is threatened or undermined by non-indigenous cultural influences. For a number of Inuit who reside in the eastern Canadian Arctic, no place reflects this process better than Iqaluit, the current capital of the
 Territory of Nunavut. If being on the land is a kind of utopia, then being in Iqaluit symbolizes a dystopia.

In what follows, I will first examine the idea of “being on the land” as a symbol of authentic Inuit identity. Next I will examine how the trope of “being in town” has come to symbolize the experience of losing one’s Inuit cultural identity. In the final section, I will examine a number of alternative perspectives on these two views, showing that Inuit perceptions of place are more complex than simple dichotomies.

Lessons from a life lived on the land

Discourse about being attached to the land, of being rooted in a place, provides a set of powerful images that indigenous leaders and intellectuals draw on to define what it means to be indigenous today, and this is no less true for Inuit leaders in Canada. For the same reason that Inuit politicians include on their webpage biography that they were born in an igloo (http://www.gov.nu.ca/cley/english/ministerbio.html, accessed 24 August 2009), others claim that no Inuit live in Iqaluit (Searles, 2008), a not-so-subtle reference to the destructive influences of Qallunaat (“white people’s”) ways and values in Inuit communities. Being born in an igloo signifies a primal (and primordial) attachment to the land that gives an individual life history a degree of authenticity and moral authority that being born in a hospital does not. An Inuit-sponsored guide to Inuit culture, *The Inuit Way*, published by Pauktutiit, the Canadian Inuit Women’s Association, states, “While differences exist among modern Inuit as to how closely they follow traditional values, all Inuit are proud of their culture and recognize the importance of keeping it alive. Many Inuit continue to have close ties to the land and consider their relationship to the land to be essential to their culture and to their survival as a distinct people” (Pauktutiit, 2006: 4). See Figure 1.

An important concept in this context is authenticity, a term I use throughout this article. One common definition of authenticity defines it as a quality of being genuine and real, and it can be attributed to objects, people, and actions (“Authenticity”). Canadian Inuit relate to authenticity in different ways, two of which were alluded to above. When Brody writes about longing to be on the land where [Inuit] lived most fully as themselves, he is referencing the sense of an authentic way of life, one that is genuine and real. The quote from *The Inuit Way* refers to the importance of Inuit remaining a distinct people, which is another example of how Inuit conceptualize authenticity as a quality of distinctiveness and originality.

The concept of authenticity provides a backdrop for a wide range of value judgments about tradition, place, and identity. Authenticity has come to mean a way of life that predates the arrival of Qallunaat traditions and values, a time when Inuit were free from the influence of the outside (i.e. non-Inuit) world. By extension, authenticity has become an index used to measure the relative Inuitness of people, places, and activities (see below). Those Inuit persons, places, and activities that best exemplify (or represent) life before the arrival of
Qallunaat qualify as being most genuinely Inuit. An elder who speaks very little English and who is familiar with life before the advent of modern towns and villages is considered to be authentically Inuit. By contrast, those Inuit who have little knowledge of the past, or who do not speak Inuktitut or do not know the traditional activities associated with the past such as certain...
types of hunting and fishing practices, for example, are not considered to be authentically Inuit. As stated by Rasing, whereas Inuit used to hunt for survival, now they hunt because it is an essential part of their identity, “Hunting is a prime means for Iglulingmiut [a group of north Baffin Island Inuit] to express their identity as a people” and to distinguish themselves from Qallunaat (Rasing, 1999: 97).

I witnessed such categorization of Inuit identity and authenticity while conducting research on outpost camps that were situated along the southern and northern coastline of Frobisher Bay in southern Baffin Island (see Figure 2; Iqaluit is at the head of Frobisher Bay). My wife and I lived with an outpost camp family for a number of months in 1994, a family that had moved to the camp from the largest town on Baffin Island, Iqaluit, in 1977. The camp consisted of one family headed by an Inuit elder accompanied by several of his children, who helped with daily chores and with hunting and hunting-related activities (e.g. maintenance and repair of snowmobiles, outboard motors, rifles). A family member based in the nearest town of Iqaluit told me that the family was essentially exiled to the outpost camp settlement because of the father’s alcoholism and repeated incidences of violence and abuse. The father’s brother-in-law (wife’s brother) told him that he could either relocate his family to an outpost camp or lose contact with his

Figure 2. Atlas of Canada, Map 25, scale 1:5,000,000, © Department of Natural Resources Canada. All rights reserved. Accessed online at www.nrcan.gc.ca (30 August 2010) and place names for Frobisher Bay and the Kuyait Outpost Camp mentioned in the article added by the author.
family, which at the time consisted of a wife and five children. The father decided to move to the camp where he quit drinking immediately, and a ban on alcohol consumption at camp remained in place until the outpost camp was abandoned in the late 1990s.

Daily routines at the outpost camp entailed a great deal of hunting, fishing, and trapping in a variety of settings and conditions. Traveling by snowmobile in winter, we hunted along a shelf of sea ice that was adjoined to the open ocean and sheets of thin ice that came and went with the tides and trade winds or disappeared all together in the wake of a powerful storm. This transition zone of temporary ice is a place of enormous productivity for hunters, as it is where many marine mammals like to congregate in winter.

We also traveled inland and along coastlines to hunt for caribou, ptarmigan, and Arctic hare. In the spring we fished a local lake for Arctic char and we also hunted Canada geese, whose summer migration to the Arctic occurred in late May. In summer we hunted seals and waterfowl in the open ocean by boat.

Hunting is the primary source of “real” (or authentic) Inuit food (Rasing, 1999: 96; Searles, 2002), the consumption of which creates real Inuit persons. The consumption of Qallunaat food (food purchased in stores), in contrast, does not necessarily make Inuit more Qallunaat, but it does not make them “real” Inuit either.

Another key aspect of living on the land is that it provides a great deal of other benefits. Living off the land, so many Inuit believe, creates intelligent and moral persons. Individuals develop *isuma* (reason, capacity to think) through facing the elements of sea, snow, ice, and wind:

... it was in particular through a body of knowledge about the natural world and how to deal with it that the Igdlungmiut – like all other groups of Inuit – sought to control their environment. Hunting required a highly detailed knowledge system of the weather, the land, of ice and snow conditions and of animals and their behavior. Every hunter had to acquire this comprehensive and personal body of knowledge. The learning process began at a young age, when a person’s *isuma* (reason, capacity to think) had developed to the point where “one begins to understand things”, as my informants put it. (Rasing, 1999: 98)

Traveling on the land and sea and hunting expose Inuit to conditions that cultivate cognitive development, emotional control, and self-awareness, and they equip Inuit to deal with unexpected and often life-threatening conditions (Briggs, 1991).

Inuit believe that hunting and associated activities (like processing and sharing meat) creates moral persons because it encourages Inuit to be aware of their obligations to others and to the hunted animals themselves. At the camp, one of the leader’s sons, Ooleetoa, made frequent references to the fact that his oldest brother was no longer a good hunter. Although he had learned to hunt at a young age, the brother no longer respected the animals he hunted, nor did he provide the kind of support to family that was expected of him. As a consequence, his hunting abilities had deteriorated drastically in the last couple of years to the point that his younger brothers had to provide him
and his family with regular supplies of seal and walrus meat to keep them supplied with Inuit food.

While conducting my dissertation research in south Baffin in 1994, I learned about an experimental government program designed specifically to provide Inuit young offenders (those who had been convicted of breaking the law) with access to land-based activities. Based at the Tungait Outpost Camp 180 miles from Iqaluit, two Inuit elders were hired to teach the young offenders how to read the weather, how to hunt walrus, and how to maintain an outpost camp, among other skills. The goal of the program was simple: to reduce recidivism. The philosophy behind the program was equally straightforward. Teaching young Inuit how to survive on their own in the Arctic wilderness would make them better persons, more responsible and considerate of the needs of others (Searles, 1998).  

Pauloosie, a 25-year-old man whom I first met in Iqaluit in 1990, attributed his transformation from a drug dealer and drug user living on the streets of Iqaluit to an accomplished hunter who provided copious quantities of meat and fish to his family to the intervention of an outpost camp family that adopted him in the mid 1980s. Isolated from the negative influences of his peers, Pauloosie learned to hunt, fish, and trap as an apprentice to his father and to his older brothers and sisters, several of whom had been rescued from drug and alcohol-related problems like him. It was with great honor and pride that Pauloosie accepted the invitation of the two elders who ran the young offenders program at the Tungait Outpost Camp to help them supervise and teach the young Inuit the ways of traditional Inuit.

In Nunavut, on-the-land programs continue to be used by a wide range of local and regional organizations for a wide range of purposes involving wellness and recovery, including spiritual retreats, drug and alcohol rehabilitation, child education, and criminal reform.

Qallunaat is to town as Inuit is to land

A tacit assumption in the cases mentioned above is that just as the land is a place where people go to be healed, so is the town a place where Inuit lose their way culturally, morally, psychologically, and spiritually. The claim that “I was born in an igloo” serves to accentuate and amplify the stereotype that Arctic towns, particularly towns with large populations of Qallunaat (“white people”), are places of moral failure and cultural collapse.

The possibility of an authentic urban Inuit identity continues, in many ways, to be frustrated by an unwillingness on the part of Inuit and Qallunaat alike to imagine the more densely populated, ethnically diverse towns (e.g. Iqaluit’s population includes as many Inuit as Qallunaat) as places where Inuit culture and identity can prosper. In addition to the idea that the land heals while the town hurts are the assumptions of social science researchers themselves who associate the transformation of Inuit culture and society with the twin processes of modernization and urbanization (e.g. Brody, 1975; Vallee et al., 1984), processes assumed to be beyond the control and against the will of Inuit themselves (Searles, 2006). The ethnographic record is much
more complicated than this, and it is clear that while some Inuit intentionally stayed away from the towns, many were eager to move to them, as many Inuit perceived the move as a way to improve their chances for survival (Damas, 2002).

Another reason why towns came to be imagined as places antithetical to Inuit tradition was due to their social structure. Much of the ethnographic literature describing the social dynamics of Arctic towns in the 1960s and 1970s make frequent reference to their divisiveness (e.g. Vallee, 1967; Brody, 1975; Paine, 1977). Inuit and Qallunaat formed distinct, segregated communities circumscribed by caste-like rules and boundaries limiting interaction between the two groups. Without exception, Inuit belonged to the subordinate caste. Refracted through a lens of indigenous identity politics, places where Inuit were once socially stigmatized and politically marginalized became places where authentic Inuit culture was imperiled and polluted by contact with unsympathetic Qallunaat.

John and Irma Honigmann, a husband and wife anthropology team who wrote one of the first ethnographies that referenced the caste dynamic of Canadian Arctic society, identified Iqaluit as a place where EuroCanadians (i.e. Qallunaat) “monopolize power and initiative” (Honigmann & Honigmann, 1965: 159). The monopolization of power and initiative stems directly from the government policy directed at Inuit in the 1950s and 1960s. This policy, referred to as tutelage by some anthropologists (Paine, 1977), concentrated the social and economic power of the towns in the hands of a few civil servants, most of whom had little to no experience living in the Arctic. Each settlement and town was run by a government-appointed Northern Service Officer who became responsible for mentoring Inuit into the “proper” ways of getting an education, maintaining a house, and keeping a job. The ultimate goal of tutelage was to enable Inuit to assimilate into mainstream Canadian society. The asymmetrical relations of power and privilege that existed in each community made casual and intimate relations between the two groups awkward and strained.

Ironically, these same civil servants who held all the power and decision-making authority in towns were relatively helpless when traveling on the land. Inexperienced in the ways of Arctic travel and inept at many of the skills necessary for survival, Qallunaat had to rely heavily on the talents and knowledge of local Inuit whenever they left the settlement. The near-total inversion of power and prestige also fed the stereotype linking place to ethnicity, to the idea that the land is a place where Inuit traditional knowledge and identity thrive while the towns are places where Qallunaat forms of power and knowledge dominate.

Coinciding with the policy of tutelage was a steady transformation in Inuit settlement patterns, from semi-nomadic to year round residency in a government-supported village or hamlet. In the 1940s and 1950s, only a small percentage of Inuit families abandoned their trap lines to take up permanent residence in one of the villages, but the flow grew more rapid after a series of famines and epidemics spread throughout the Arctic in the 1950s and caused Inuit to rely more intensely on healthcare, social assistance, and other
resources provided by the federal government and by various churches that were based in the villages. By 1965, more than 95% of the entire Inuit population in the Canadian Arctic lived in some 50 permanent villages (Dorais, 1991: 19). While it is true that the Canadian government forcibly relocated a number of Inuit families to these villages (Tester & Kulchyski, 1994; Marcus, 1995), there is substantial evidence to suggest that much of the migration was voluntary rather than a government-planned relocation (Damas, 2002). Damas argues that the federal government was as concerned about keeping the Inuit population dispersed (away from the settlements) as they were protecting them from famine and disease.

Indigenous sovereignty movements and place in the 1970s

Federal policies directed towards Inuit populations began to shift again in the 1970s when the Canadian government established a Comprehensive Land Claims Policy under which “aboriginal rights” [to certain territories and resources could] be exchanged for a clearly defined package of rights and benefits set out in a land claim settlement agreement” (Hicks & White, 2000: 94). During this time, the Inuit themselves began to argue more vociferously for greater local control over lands and resources and for greater government support for education and economic development programs. The town of Iqaluit, once reviled as a place where Qallunaat treated Inuit like second-class citizens, suddenly became an epicenter of Inuit power and authority. A number of its new Inuit residents, migrants from other parts of the Arctic, would soon become the authors of a new narrative of Inuit identity that made Inuit and Qallunaat equal partners in the process of creating a new society and a new political culture. The young offenders outpost camp program mentioned above and that I documented in the mid 1990s was just one example among many in which Inuit and Qallunaat officials collaborated to create social and economic programs that institutionalized the value of Inuit tradition and cultural heritage (Searles, 1998). The new narrative of Inuit political identity would reach its climax in the form of Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit (IQ), a concept that “has become a buzzword throughout Nunavut as Inuit strive to make their government distinctly Inuit” (Stevenson, 2006: 177). The concept encompasses “all aspects of traditional Inuit culture including values, world-view, language, social organization, knowledge, life skills, perceptions, and expectations” (Nunavut Social Development Council quoted in Stevenson, 2006: 177).

Despite a sincere attempt to reinvent the role of public government in the Arctic, many Inuit continued to imagine Iqaluit as a place where Qallunaat values and traditions triumphed and where Inuit values and traditions were severely attenuated or even non-existent. “There are no Inuit in Iqaluit” was a phrase I heard from one senior colleague, who was quoting Inuit from north Baffin Island whom he’d been living with and researching off and on for the past 20 years (Searles, 2008). Rasing’s analysis of the social classification system used by Iglulingmiut (Inuit from the northern Nunavut town of Iglulik) identifies three categories of persons, inummariit, qallunaamiut, and
qallunaamariit. Inummariit ("real or authentic Inuit") are Inuit who grew up with little to no contact with Qallunaat. Qallunaamiut are those Inuit who had much more contact with Qallunaat (Qallunaamiut literally means "[Inuit] people of the white people") but who managed to maintain a knowledge of the past and continued to incorporate Inuit traditions and values into their everyday lives. Qallunaamariit ("real white people") are those Inuit who act like Qallunaat and who have, according to Rasing's informants, renounced much of their ties to the world of Inuit (Searles, 2008). It seems that a widely shared assumption of many north Baffin Inuit is that most, if not all, Inuit living in Iqaluit are qallunaamariit. A strange dynamism of caste and class that influenced Inuit–Qallunaat relations in the 1950s and 1960s and which relegated Inuit to a subordinate social status was surfacing again in the 1980s and 1990s. This time, however, it was not Inuit who were caste as the inferior class, but Inuit who had too much contact with Qallunaat.

Life in Iqaluit

In contrast to life at the outpost camp, life in the town of Iqaluit, which in the mid 1990s had a population of 4500 permanent residents, the largest town in Nunavut Territory, seemed surprisingly familiar to life as lived in southern parts of Canada (see Figure 2). Daily routines for many Inuit and non-Inuit included school, work, and play. A daily mail service, phone service, cable television, and a broadband internet connection provided instant access to the outside world. Local grocery and department stores stocked many of the same items one would find in stores in Montreal or Toronto, although prices in the Arctic continue to be double or triple what they are in southern Canada.

While living and conducting my dissertation research in Iqaluit in the mid 1990s, I heard a wide variety of claims about the town itself, ranging on a spectrum from a great to place to live and to work to a place that was loathsome. "I hate this fucking town," one Inuit woman told me one day in the midst of a conversation about her life in Iqaluit. While some chose to highlight Iqaluit’s advantages over other Arctic villages (unlike smaller Arctic settlements, Iqaluit possessed a college, a high school, a hospital, and an array of public recreational facilities including an indoor ice rink, an indoor curling rink, and an indoor swimming pool), others complained that it was an extremely violent place that lacked a sense of community. In 1994, I witnessed a crowd of angry residents force the eviction of a local family purportedly involved in the production of child pornography videos and the sale of illicit drugs. Also in 1994, the local newspaper broke a story about the mayor of Iqaluit who was caught embezzling local tax revenues to build a house in Ottawa. The ensuing investigation forced the resignation of the entire city council including the mayor, and the regional government appointed a city manager to run the town until the next round of elections.

Scandals aside, it was not difficult to find Inuit who were quite content and even proud to be living in Iqaluit. A number of Inuit families from other regions of the Canadian Arctic had moved there in the 1980s and 1990s to
take advantage of emerging employment opportunities in the territorial government and in the Inuit-run organization created to handle the benefits Inuit would receive according to the terms of the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement, which became an official Act of Parliament in 1993. I met a number of successful Inuit entrepreneurs who found Iqaluit an excellent place to do business, including one who owned and leased a number of office buildings, one who started an internet-provider business, and another who co-owned and jointly operated (with a Qallunaaq friend from Spokane, Washington) a tourist outfitting company. I met a number of Inuit who had moved to Iqaluit to attend high school and college and who sought to make a name for themselves in regional politics and government.

Many Inuit families living in Iqaluit continued to practice those traditions that Inuit politicians highlighted as the key to cultural survival, including maintaining strong ties to the land. Although many had relegated their subsistence activities to a weekend trip to the floe edge to hunt for polar bears and seals or a week-long trip to a lake or river to fish for Arctic char, there was a large and active population of hunting families in the town. A large number of families spent several weeks or months away from town during the summer months of July and August, traveling and camping at various points along the coastline of Frobisher Bay. About a dozen families moved from their public housing units in the center of town to a makeshift tent community along a stretch of road leading to the edge of town called “the causeway”. The causeway ran close to the Grinnell River, a prime spot for fishing and boating. In their own contemporary way, the residents of the causeway tent community were reproducing a cultural tradition dating back to the beginning of the fur trade era in the Canadian Arctic (circa 1920s), when Inuit began to divide the year between time spent at cabins (November through April) built with wood and canvas and often covered with sod, and time spent at a variety of campsites Inuit would occupy for shorter intervals in the spring and summer. What was unusual about the causeway camp community is that it was so close to town (one could still walk to the stores in town to pick up groceries or other supplies if necessary) and a stone’s throw from the town dump, which, when burning, caused a layer of smoke and haze to hover over the tents but which contained mounds of discarded items that could be salvaged and sometimes consumed.

There existed a number of Inuit who, by the standards established by north Baffin Inuit, had no interest in those activities or forms of knowledge associated with authentic Inuit culture. One of my Inuit friends in town did not like to go out hunting or fishing at all. He was a sales clerk at the local Northern Department Store, and he had a passion for movies and video games. He was fortunate enough to have his own room in a fairly crowded house, which he shared with his parents, as well as several uncles and aunts, and one of his most prized possessions was his own television and VHS player. He invited my wife and I to his home on a number of occasions to watch his latest favorite movie.

As a researcher, I found myself subscribing to the stereotypes issuing from the speeches of Inuit politicians and the rhetoric of northern Inuit who
portrayed towns as places where Inuit were no longer Inuit. Participating in
the hunt and butchering of a bearded seal on the sea ice seemed to be a much
more authentic expression of inuksitut ("the way of an Inuit person") than
playing video games or dancing at a bar in Iqaluit. I met a number of
Qallunaat residents of Iqaluit who possessed even more negative stereotypes
about urban Inuit than me and who regarded with suspicion those Inuit who
never learned to hunt or live off the land like Inuit elders from a generation
ago. When I asked the manager of the scientific research station in Iqaluit to
borrow some equipment for a weekend-long hunting and fishing excursion
that I claimed was integral to my research into the hunting culture of local
Inuit families, she refused on the grounds that the equipment was not to be
used for recreation. Although part of her decision was motivated by a
prejudice against ethnographic research, part of it was also motivated by a
conviction that town-based hunters were not really authentic Inuit hunters at
all but recreational ones.

Adding to the idea that Iqaluit was not a place conducive to the cultivation
of Inuit traditional culture and identity were the comments of outpost camp
Inuit with whom we lived. Ooleetoo, one of the sons of the camp leader,
mentioned frequently how life at camp and life in town constituted two
different worlds, two different realms of experience. He complained about
how living in town made him weak, lazy, and bored whereas living at the
outpost camp made him strong, industrious, and passionate. “Falling in love
is a lot better at camp than it is in town,” he claimed, because it made him feel
warm and gave him a renewed sense of energy. Falling in love at camp opened
his mind to the natural beauty of life around him, including the stars, the
land, and the sea. Falling in love in town, by contrast, evoked none of these
sensations. The claims made by outpost camp Inuit mimicked, in many ways,
the ideology of Inuit leaders who associated the act of maintaining ties to the
land with personal virtue and collective vitality and the work of living in
towns with depravity, marginalization, and the loss of self-esteem.

At the same time, many Inuit commented that outpost camps were not
really the centers of traditional Inuit culture as some had labeled them. Some
argued that outpost camp residents used far too many modern conveniences
to be considered "traditional," things like snowmobiles, oil-burning stoves,
generators, and kerosene lamps. In order to be traditional, I heard one Inuit
say, outpost camp Inuit had to trade their snowmobiles for dog teams, their
kerosene lamps for stone lamps fueled by seal blubber, and their rifles for
hand made harpoons and knives. Others complained that outpost camp Inuit
lived a sort of artificial existence because all of the camp’s expenses for fuel,
equipment, and supplies were paid for by the regional government and by the
local hunters and trappers association.4 One town-based Inuk, after spending
a week at an outpost camp in the spring of 1994, complained that being at
camp is like "one big vacation."

Linguistically the outpost camps didn’t always fit the mold of “authentic
traditional Inuit culture” either. An Inuit elder from an outpost camp in
south Baffin told me that outpost camps used to be called ukiariwik ("place of
winter residence"). Today, Inuit refer to them as nunaligalait ("little towns"),
in large part because they have so many comforts and so many “Qallunaat things,” including the amenities mentioned above. The fact that the change in appellation, from ukiarivik to nunaligalait, was caused by a perceived dependence on goods and technologies emanating from the world of Qallunaat signals the importance of ethnic difference at the heart of Inuit identity.

Can town Inuit be authentic Inuit?

The same man who identified outpost camps as places where Inuit were no longer living the traditional way of life also made an interesting point about the differences that divide Inuit and Qallunaat. He claimed that it is easier to distinguish between Inuit things and Qallunaat things because they have been brought closer together; increased proximity has made it easier to identify the differences between the two groups (Searles, 2008: 248–249). Nowhere is this more evident than in places like Iqaluit, where the differences that distinguish Qallunaat and Inuit are ubiquitous. Walking into an Inuit-run household in Iqaluit one is likely to encounter smells (boiling seal meat), sights (a caribou leg on the kitchen floor), and sounds (Inuktitut language being spoken by a child to a parent) that one would never encounter in the home of a Qallunaat family, where one is more likely to encounter spotless plush carpets, the latest models of the most high-end line of appliances available on the market, and not the least hint of odor anywhere thanks to deodorizers placed in every room.

The policy changes ushered in by the implementation of a new Nunavut government and a set of principles (IQ) to guide the culture of that government has made the urban lifestyle more acceptable and more appealing to many Inuit, even if Inuit from smaller communities claim that Inuit who live in Iqaluit are no longer Inuit. With more job and educational opportunities available to Inuit young and old, and with more and more businesses owned and run by Inuit entrepreneurs, an urban Inuit identity is becoming less stigmatized even as the rhetoric used by Inuit politicians relies on cultural dichotomies that oppose Inuit culture with town-based lifestyles. Only time (and more ethnographic research) will tell to what extent town Inuit can truly be considered Inuit in the sense that those who live off the land are considered real Inuit, and more importantly, to what extent Inuit cultural identity relies on place-based signifiers and place-specific practices.

One factor affecting the use of towns in the expression of Inuit cultural identity is the enormous stratification (Qallunaat enjoy significantly higher average wages and higher overall employment levels than Inuit in Iqaluit (Hicks & White, 2000)) that exists between Inuit and Qallunaat living in Iqaluit. In the 1990s, the phrase “caught between two worlds” was commonly used to describe a cohort of urbanized Inuit who seemed unable to succeed in the world of traditional Inuit and unable to compete in the world of Qallunaat culture, symbolized by wage employment and the local educational system. “I try to live balanced, but I’m caught in between! I know how to Inuk [be an Inuit person] but not fully Inuk like my parents were. I’ll never
be that ... I know the white’s way of life but that will never make me a white, so I am in between” (Maata quoted in Billson & Mancini, 2007: 147). These socioeconomic factors only serve to intensify the assumption that Inuit do not really belong in towns; their natural place is out on the land hunting, trapping, fishing, and gathering.

Conclusion

In recent decades, anthropologists have become critical of the assumption that culture is “naturally the property of a spatially localized people and that the way to study such a culture is to go ‘there’” (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997: 3). “All associations of place, people, and culture,” Gupta and Ferguson argue, “are social and historical creations to be explained, not given natural facts” (1997: 4). The impetus for such revisionism is that many aspects of contemporary culture are being spatialized in new ways, and “whatever associations of place and culture [that] may exist must be taken as problems for anthropological research rather than the given ground that one takes as a point of departure” (1997: 4).

The irony of the spatialization of Inuit identity in the Arctic is that many Inuit seem unwilling to extend that identity into urban spaces even as more and more Inuit are becoming urbanized. Like so many indigenous political movements throughout the world, ideas about Inuit self-determination rest heavily on the notion that maintaining strong ties to the land remains vital to the survival of Inuit culture, and conversely, that developing strong ties to towns leads to many social and psychological problems. And yet as increasing numbers of Inuit adopt urban identities and lifestyles, the act of being on the land has become more of a choice than a necessity, more of a time to seek temporary solace and comfort than a place to that Inuit need to go in order to be truly (or authentically) Inuit.

Whether or not Inuit and non-Inuit living in the Canadian Arctic are willing to welcome and incorporate recent demographic changes into the definition of Inuit identity remains unclear. More research can expose the factors inhibiting and enhancing the development of an authentic urban Inuit identity in the Canadian Arctic. I hope that this article has helped this effort by revealing the tensions that inform the symbolism linking Inuit identity to place and the trends and contradictions that threaten to undermine them.

Notes

1 The Canada-US Fulbright Program, the International Council for Canadian Studies, the Canadian Embassy in the US, and the University of Washington provided funding for the anthropological research documented in this article.

2 For a description of a more contemporary on-the-land program targeting troubled Inuit adolescents, see “Pour ne pas perdre le nord [How to prevent cabin fever]” (Loisel, 2009).

3 Although many Inuit might think an authentic urban identity is absurd if not impossible, a growing number of Inuit raised in larger towns in the Arctic and southern Canada would recognize the concept
as providing cultural and moral legitimacy to the traditions and experiences of Inuit living an urban lifestyle.

A precipitous drop in the global trade of seal skins and other Arctic animal furs in the late 1970s caused a collapse in the revenue that Inuit hunters used to rely on to pay for their hunting trips, a condition that left many full-time Inuit hunters destitute and which made hunting a prohibitively costly activity for many Canadian Inuit (Wenzel, 1991).

References


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