

# Canadian Inuit are growing stronger

by David Webster  
Northern News Service

OTTAWA, CANADA — In the early days, Inuit were nomadic, moving with the seasons and the animals they hunted.

Today, Inuit communities are clusters of permanent dwellings, usually wood-frame houses with oil-burning furnaces. Most communities are small and isolated by great distance from each other.

All the communities, except one, are situated on bays, inlets and fiords, close to the sea and the marine mammals which provide food and the materials for clothing. (Baker Lake in the Keewatin is the only inland Inuit community and there the people depend on caribou for subsistence.)

Inuit communities range in size from Arviat on the western shore of Hudson Bay with more than 1,200 residents to Grise Fiord on Ellesmere Island with 106 residents, according to 1981 figures.

There are about 25,000 Inuit in Canada, including 18,000 in the Northwest Territories; 4,500, Arctic; and 2,500, Labrador.

In the Northwest Territories, the only Inuit community of sufficient size to be called a town is Iqaluit at the southern end of Baffin Island. It has a population of 2,400 people — 1981 census — about two-thirds of whom are Inuit. All other Inuit communities are classified either as hamlets or settlements.

Many settlements began with the Hudson's Bay Co. or a private trader setting up a trading post. Inuit came to the post to trade pelts for ammunition, food, tobacco and other items.

Shortly after the trading posts were established, Anglican and Roman Catholic missionaries came and built churches nearby. The people lived in the vicinity in scattered camps and missionaries travelled by dog team from camp to camp.

The people would travel to the posts to attend church services, especially at Easter and Christmas. Later the RCMP, nursing stations, schools and other government departments came to these posts.

By the late 1960s in all regions, most of the people living in camps had settled into communities, although in some places they had done so earlier.

An Inuit community today in many ways resembles the kind of small rural community that one finds in southern Canada.

One readily noticed difference is that the houses rest a couple of feet off the ground on wooden posts. This

prevents the warmth of the house from melting the permanently frozen ground.

Water is generally delivered to the houses by water truck and stored indoors in a large plastic container. A few communities are fortunate enough

to have a "utilidor" system by which insulated pipes take water to homes and other public buildings.

In most communities there is a community hall, a nursing station, a school, a co-operative store and a Hudson's Bay Co. store.

Some communities have a police station, a fire hall, an adult education center, a local radio station, a municipal office and possibly a hotel and video arcade.

The movement of people into communities was perhaps the most dramatic instance of the changes that have come so quickly to Inuit.

Families that had been living in hunting camps, in snowhouses in the winter and tents in summer, suddenly found themselves in houses with oil heat and electricity.

This was more than a simple change of residence; it brought with it a host of other strange ways of doing things.

It was like someone in southern Canada moving for the first time from a rural area to a big city, but it included having to cope with an utterly alien culture as well.

Now, instead of living in scattered camps, large numbers of people lived close together, next to each other, and this required a great deal of adjustment.

Now, instead of the best hunter emerging as camp leader, they were told to elect a settlement council chairman or hamlet mayor. This was a new and peculiar way of choosing leaders.

The sudden influx of television programs from southern Canada — some originated from the United States — was seen by many Inuit as a threat to their culture.

Young people who understood English, found programs such as Three's Company and shows about private detectives enjoyable.

But to Inuktitut-speaking elders, these shows made no sense at all. In fact, they gave a wrong impression of life in the south. It seemed as if everyone in the south was involved in car chases, drug pushing and shooting at each other.

The threat of this impact was recognized by Inuit Tapirisat of Canada, the national organization established to strengthen Inuit efforts in looking after their own interests.

ITC, with federal government

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assistance, began to train staff and develop its own television programming in the late 1970s, and in 1981 the Inuit Broadcasting Co. was formed.

Production centers were established in various communities which produced television programs in Inuktitut about Inuit culture. These programs were aired on the CBC channel for a few hours each week. Inuit were learning to use modern technology to their advantage.

When Inuit lived in camps, they hunted animals for food, using the hides for clothing and the bones and antlers to make tools and weapons. Money and material things were not important.

The animals provided the essential things needed for survival, and food could be shared with others less successful in the hunt.

Life in the community changed all that. Money became of prime importance as the cost of goods at local stores was extremely high.

Although many Inuit were still hunting and trapping for a living, others were working at whatever jobs were available. More and more, those people working for wages tended to become weekend hunters.

One major source of employment in most communities is art and crafts, and there are many co-operatives for retailing the work of local artisans to tourists and to markets in the south.

Inuit soapstone carvings, prints and wall hangings are recognized and collected in many parts of the world. But

the majority of jobs are with the federal, territorial, provincial or local governments.

Most of those jobs are held by southern Canadians, but they are gradually being taken over by Inuit as they acquire the training and skills needed.

Each year more and more Inuit youth graduate from high school and go back to their home communities looking for work.

Unfortunately, there are not enough jobs to go around, and many people are unemployed. Because their youth was spent getting an academic education, they have not learned the Inuit skills for living off the land.

Youth often feel lost between two worlds, the traditional ways of their fathers and mothers and southern culture that they acquired at school. Frustration and a sense of displacement too often lead to problems of alcohol and drug abuse and, far too often, to suicide.

Most Inuit communities in the Arctic have a local alcohol and drug committee to try to deal with these problems.

It is impossible now for Inuit to go back to the old ways. They use whatever modern technology is advantageous to them and reject what they feel is useless. They are still isolated enough to do so.

Their traditions, language and culture are very important to them. Because of this, they are still strong as a people and are getting stronger as time goes on.