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Cultural and Ethnic Identities of Inuit in Canada

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INTRODUCTION

Since the 1960s, ethnicity has been one of the central concepts in social sciences (for example, see Barth 1969; Bentley 1987; Banks 1996; Sollors 1997; Kim 2000: 78). An important topic related to the study of ethnicity is the problem of ethnic identity. As human beings have multiple identities, ethnic identity is one of many identities of a person or group. This paper is concerned with identities of the contemporary Inuit in Canada. In the late 1990s, approximately 15 percent of Canadian Inuit lived in urban centers in southern Canada (Kishigami 1999a; 1999b; 1999c). Thus, in order to understand the identities of Canadian Inuit, we need to include the study of the identities of Inuit living both in arctic villages and in southern cities of Canada.

As far as my knowledge of studies on identities of the Inuit and Yupiit is concerned, we have not clearly distinguished between cultural identity and ethnic identity. We have had a tendency to focus on either of the identities or to have confused them. While Fienup-Riordan (1983), Wenzel (1991; 2001), Nuttall (1992), and Omura (1998; 2002) are primarily concerned with several aspects of cultural identity in arctic peoples, Kishigami (1992; 2002), Briggs (1997), and Stewart (1998; 2002) mainly deal with aspects of ethnic identity.

We find some gaps between Inuit life in the arctic and discourse in the political arena. Dorais and Briggs attempt to account for the gaps. Dorais (1994) employs the concept of cultural identity, which is related to but different from that of ethnic identity. Briggs makes a distinction between cultural traits deriving from the daily life of Inuit and emblems, which are chosen as “emotionally charged markers” by Inuit from the cultural traits (Briggs 1997: 228). It seems to me that the traits are connected to cultural identity and the emblems to ethnic identity.

In this paper, I will explain that while Inuit living in arctic villages are reproducing their cultural identity through daily socio-cultural practices in Inuit appropriate ways, they seldom express their ethnic identity in their daily life. In almost a reverse situation, many urban Inuit except those who come down south as adults¹, have difficulty sustaining their cultural identity in multi-ethnic situations but maintain their ethnic identity as a wall against other ethnic people. I will emphasize that there is a difference between being an Inuk and being a member of the Inuit people, using data from research in Akulivik and Montreal of Canada.

CONCEPT OF IDENTITY AND THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

A person needs to know his position in society in order to have a frame of reference for social interaction with other members of that society. It enables a social life free of any serious difficulties. He forms his social relations and interacts with others according to one or more of his identities. As he grows, he gains multiple social roles and identities. At any given time, he interacts with others by employing one, or a combination of, several identities. As a society becomes more complex and diverse, the problem of a person's identity becomes critical and increasingly significant to his life.

Identity is the representation of a person's or a group's particular place in the world. It may be self-ascribed or defined by others, or it may be both. Generally, a person has several identities at a given time and his identities may change over his lifetime. Ethnic identity, one of a person's identities, can be a frame of reference for social practice in a multi-ethnic society (Lambert 1986), only where a sense of ethnic identity develops (Dorais 1994).

Dorais distinguishes cultural identity from ethnic identity. He regards the former concept as "a fundamental consciousness of the specificity of the group to which one belongs in terms of ways of living, customs, languages, values, etc." (Dorais 1994: translated by Gombay (2000: 130)). According to Dorais (1994), before Inuit participation in non-Inuit economic, social, and political system, Inuit had a sense of cultural identity that distinguished them from other people and other living things. Cultural identity is related to all domains of daily life, but ethnic identity is a politicized cultural identity (Lanting 1999: 135). The latter is "connected with the political domain and becomes manifest in relation to and confrontation with others within the context of a larger political arena, or state" (Lanting 1999: 135)².

In a sense, ethnic identity and aboriginal ethnicity have emerged among the Inuit of Canada by the late 1970s. Arctic people in Canada "have become Inuit, a specific nationality within a larger Canadian state composed of many peoples. As Inuit developed this awareness, they followed the example set by other aboriginal populations in Canada and started negotiating land claims in the 1970s" (Gombay 2000: 134).

COMPLEXITY OF CANADIAN INUIT IDENTITY: A CASE OF INUIT IN AKULIVIK

In the 1920s, when Inuit participated in fur trade and made frequent contact with Europeans and Euro-Americans, such as fur traders, missionaries, explorers etc., the identities of Inuit involved: (1) living existence; (2) human being (Inuit); (3) names; (4) extended family; (5) winter community or camp place; and (6) dialect speaker. At the time, there was not an Inuit identity based on ethnicity. However, this type of identity would start to emerge during the period of contact with Europeans and Euro-Americans (cf. Burch 1980).

In the 1930s, Inuit, who engaged in arctic fox fur trading at the Hudson's Bay Company Post on Cape Smith Island, began to identify themselves as Cape Smith Inuit. This identity was created through the fur trade. In the 1950s, the federal government implemented the sedentarization policy and attempted to make Inuit a Canadian national. After the 1950s, identities of particular villages, territories and provinces started to emerge as a reality

through administrative divisions.

In the 1970s, the Inuit identity as members of the Northwest Territories or of northern Quebec were strengthened through their land claim negotiations with federal and other governments (Stewart 1998; 2002). In the 1982 constitution, Inuit people are recognized as an indigenous people of Canada. Section 3 of the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement (1975), as well as Article 35 of the Nunavut Agreement (1993), define the conditions under which the Inuit qualify as a beneficiary. In the 1970s, the political identity of Canadian Inuit across the country, aboriginal identity of Canada, political identity of circumpolar peoples, and Forth World identity started to emerge among the Inuit of Canada. For example, the Inuit Circumpolar Conference was established in 1979. This political event contributed to full development of the Inuit's Canadian identity, an identity as Inuit vs. other ethnic groups within Canada, and another identity as Canadian Inuit vs. Inuit and Yupiit of other countries. It was during the 1970s that Canadian Inuit made use of ethnic identity as a political tool to cope with implementations of Euro-Canadian policy and ideology, as well as the international politics affecting all the circumpolar peoples. They used their cultural traditions such as drum dances, throat singing, games, and hunting in order to demonstrate their distinctiveness as an ethnic group in the nation of Canada and to unite themselves with other arctic groups of the former USSR, Alaska and Greenland (Kishigami 1992). At the latest, the establishment of Nunavut Territory in 1999 gave the Inuit a pride and a strong sense of Inuit identity (Wenzel 2001).

In Akulivik in the late 1990s, an Inuk had a set of multiple identities and used one or a combination of some of them in a given situation to interact with others. His identities may be distinguished as the following:

- identity(A) living existence;
- identity(B) a member of this earth (human being, Inuit);
- identity(C) a member of indigenous peoples;
- identity(D) a member of arctic indigenous peoples;
- identity(E) a Canadian national;
- identity(F) a member of Indigenous peoples of Canada;
- identity(G) a member of Inuit of Canada;
- identity(H) a member of Nunavut or Nunavik;
- identity(I) a member of a particular region such as the eastern Hudson Bay Coast;
- identity(J) a member of a particular village or city;
- identity(K) a member of a particular extended family;
- identity(L) a member of a particular household or a nuclear family;
- identity(M) personal names;
- identity(N) identities associated with social positions such as father, teacher, Christian, or hunter, etc.

An Inuk's identities have historically grown in number, diversity and complexity as well as have been context dependent³. While the number of distinct elements that discern Inuit

culture are decreasing in the process of globalization, an awareness of the Inuit as well as that of the aboriginal people are becoming more eminent and stronger.

IDENTITIES OF INUIT IN AKULIVIK, NUNAVIK OF CANADA

Outline of Akulivik Community

The village of Akulivik lies on the eastern coast of Hudson Bay (60 degrees 48 minutes north latitude and 78 degrees 8 minutes west latitude) and was officially established as a municipality of Nunavik in 1976. Almost all Akulivik adult men engage in hunting and fishing, but only about half of the 60 adult males in the contemporary community do so regularly. Participation in wage labor, however, is generally low because few jobs exist in the village. For example, in 1995 there were 55 full-time jobs, 34 part-time jobs, and 24 other mainly seasonal construction jobs in Akulivik, whose population was approximately 400 in that year (Lefebvre 1996:158, 184). The population obtains its food from hunting and fishing (30%-60%) with the remainder coming from imported southern foodstuffs purchased from the co-op store. The men who are active hunters, however, capture most of the seals, caribou and fish that come into the village, depending on transfer payments from the federal and provincial governments and/or the selling of soapstone carvings to obtain cash to support their subsistence activities.

As Stern points out in the case from Holman, “young Inuit adults of today have far more options regarding employment, recreation, marriage and family size, and life-style than any previous generation of Inuit”(Stern 2000: 10). The contemporary Inuit are not simply hunter-gatherers anymore. They have access to several kinds of jobs with differing economic orientations as well as life-styles in the contemporary mixed economy of the Canadian Arctic.

Inuit Identities in Dairy Life in Akulivik

More than 90 percent of the Akulivik population is Inuit. Their social interactions with others are mostly completed within a circle of the Inuit population in the village. The exceptions are at the nursing station and the school. When they watch and hear some political news or events concerning them on television and radio programs, they become conscious of their ethnic identity. But such occasions are rare in daily life. To Akulivik Inuit, the important thing is not to live as an ethnic person but to live as an Inuk. Being an Inuk (*inutuinnait*) is not the same as being an ethnic Inuk. In the daily life, ethnic identity is not necessarily involved.

To be an Inuk means to be a person who acts and thinks in Inuit ways, and these are related to their cultural values such as generosity and kindness. Inuit identity is not found in a mere list of cultural items (e.g., hunting, fishing, Inuktitut). It involves the distinctive way that Inuit establish their relationships with people, animals, the land, and the whole universe (Dorais 1997: 106; Omura 1998; 2002; Hensel 2001). It should be noted that the Inuit ways have been constantly changing through time.

Among Inuit, an individual's sense of being an Inuk is sustained and reproduced through their social activities in daily life. This includes the customary sharing of food in kinship

networks, communication in Inuktitut, the hunting that gives them a connection with the land and land-oriented activities, attending church service on Sunday, food distribution supplied by the hunter support program, Inuit naming, and so on (Dorais 1997; Lanting 1999). This is the basis of their cultural identity.

On the other hand, in time of some opposition or crisis the Inuit in arctic villages sometimes respond to non-Inuit anthropologists, policemen and government officials with use of ethnic identity. Their attitudes or discourses are intentional expressions of differences to outsiders and are seldom observed in daily life within their own ethnic groups.

Hunter Support Program and Community Identity of Akulivik Inuit

As an example, I hope to show that the Inuit use of the current hunter support program has created and maintained their sense of community and of being Inuit (Kishigami 2000a; 2000b). The James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement (1975) resulted in a “support program for Inuit beneficiaries for their hunting, fishing, and trapping activities” in the Nunavik region. The Inuit requested that the government of Quebec should establish the program to maintain their vital hunting and fishing activities and to obtain country food from local land and sea. The program was legalized in 1982, through Bill 83 of the Quebec Provincial Government.

The aim of the program is “to favor, encourage and perpetuate the hunting, fishing and trapping activities of the Inuit as a way of life, and to guarantee the Inuit communities a supply of produce from such activities”. Each village administers the program. Thus, each village council may obtain a community hunting boat, a communal cold storage house or buy meat and fish from local hunters with the program’s funds and provide these to villagers without charge.

Akulivik Inuit receive some meat and fish through the community hunter support program and existing food sharing networks. The food supplied by the hunter support program forms a kind of food sharing at the village level. The Akulivik Inuit regard resource sharing for mutual aid as one of their key cultural values. The sharing practices at the village level across extended families, as well as their customary food sharing primarily within each extended family, maintain and strengthen their local village identity as Akulivik residents, and furthermore foster a sense of being Inuit.

INUIT IDENTITIES OF MONTREAL, QUEBEC, CANADA

Outline of Montreal Inuit

It was in the 1980s that many Inuit born in arctic Canada began to move to southern cities. According to Aboriginal data from the Canadian census of 1991, there was a total of 8305 Inuit living in Canadian cities whose population was beyond 100,000 inhabitants. The word “Inuit” here refers to persons who claimed a full or partial Inuit identity at census time. Since the overall Canadian Inuit population reached some 49,000 individuals, this meant that about one fifth of these people lived in southern metropolises. It is estimated that 775 Inuit lived in Montreal at that time.

Inuit of Montreal, Quebec, Canada

The Montreal Inuit may be divided into three occupational categories: students, workers, and the jobless. While Inuit workers or students can live well in Montreal, those without jobs only manage to survive by recourse to charitable organizations and government welfare benefits. Many of the jobless Inuit encounter severe socio-economic problems in Montreal.

Inuit ways of life such as hunting and fishing are not observed among the Inuit in Montreal. However, they do speak with their northern friends in Inuktitut, and sometimes share some country foods that have been sent from the north or carried down to the south. Either this meat is portioned out to other Inuit, or the Inuk who possesses the meat invites other Inuit to eat with him or her. As there are very limited quantities of Inuit country foods in the city, food sharing and invitations to meals happen only occasionally. Some Inuit make soapstone carvings and other Inuit handicrafts in Montreal. But excepting those cases, there are no ethnic and cultural distinctions between ways of life of the urban Inuit and those of other city-dwellers. The Inuit adapt to existing urban institutions rather than keeping their northern way of life in Montreal.

Inuit women of Montreal tend to live with or marry non-Inuit partners, and their children tend not to speak Inuktitut or hold to Inuit cultural identity. Children born in Montreal are not encouraged to maintain Inuktitut or Inuit culture. Urban settings of the multi-ethnic city lack social conditions for maintaining Inuit culture and language.

My research of 1996 and 1997 suggests that young men who were raised in Montreal and Inuit descendants whose spouse or parent was non-Inuit began to regard themselves as indigenous people of Canada, Canadian of Inuit descent, or indigenous people of Quebec rather than as Inuit (cf. Lambert 1986; Fienup-Riordan 2000: 151–168). According to the 1991 Aboriginal census, 455 of 775 “Inuit” show multiple ethnic identities. Inter-ethnic marriage over one generation and city dwelling in multi-ethnic situations make Inuit’s intergenerational succession of their language and culture difficult and change their taste for country food (cf. Fogel-Chance 1993; Sprott 1994; Fienup-Riordan 2000: 151–168; Lee 2002).

Creation of Association of Montreal Inuit

From the 1980s to late 1990s, there were few places for Inuit to meet together and exchange information in Montreal. As Inuit of Montreal did not have any voluntary association and did not form a community, they had to create individual social networks for themselves. The situation resulted in a lack of extensive practice of food sharing and only occasional use of Inuktitut. Generally speaking, most Montreal Inuit could not create and maintain Inuit culture and cultural identity primarily because they lacked strong social solidarity and because their social networks were too weak in Montreal.

In 1998, some Montreal Inuit became concerned about the situation and held several meetings to discuss the establishment of an urban Inuit organization. When they held a country food feast at the hall of St. Paul’s Anglican Church in Lachine on a Saturday of November, 1999, about 120 Inuit were present. The group decided to voluntarily hold monthly community-style Inuit country food feasts which prevail in northern villages during

special times of the year such as Christmas or Easter (Mesher 2000).

On the 29th of March, 2000, a volunteer organization “the Association of Montreal Inuit” was officially established (Mesher 2000). This organization aims to function as a center for information exchange, sociability, Inuit language learning and culture promotion as well as providing a monthly supper to urban Inuit. This new organization, as well as the Inuit House in Ottawa “Tungasuvvingat Inuit,” which was established in the mid-1980s, provides urban Inuit with a social base for maintaining cultural as well as ethnic identities. If this organization is successful, the Inuit of Montreal may be able to maintain their cultural identity and create a new sense of a Montreal Inuit community.

Identities of Inuit in Montreal

The cultural identities of most of Inuit living in Montreal have always been threatened by multi-ethnic situations under the domination of Quebecois. As I previously pointed out, Montreal Inuit live and interact frequently with non-Inuit populations in the multi-ethnic city and lack conditions for fostering socio-cultural Inuit ways. Under these conditions, ethnic identity and ethnic symbols associated with them take precedence over cultural identity and cultural traits. In Montreal, cultural identity and cultural traits are meaningful only when Inuit interact each other in Montreal.

If Inuit living in Montreal are recognized as beneficiary Inuit of the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement or the Nunavut Agreement, they and their children may receive certain educational and medical benefits while residing in the city. As long as such benefits exist, the urban Inuit will intentionally hold on an Inuit status even though they do not speak Inuktitut or keep Inuit ways of life. In the future, a person qualified as an official Inuk without cultural identity and lifestyles of arctic Inuit will come into being. These people will need ethnic symbols to show their difference from other non-Inuit peoples and to keep their ethnic identity in the urban environment (cf. Gans 1996).

As frequency of interaction among Inuit from different regions is increased in the city, a kind of sub-group amalgamation is occurring. Also, some persons who have non-Inuit parent or ancestors express multiple-ethnic identities (cf. in the case of Yupiit, see Hensel 2001: 175). Furthermore, some second and third generation urban Inuit have been assimilated into Euro-Canadian society. Thus, it appears that urban Inuit are using ethnic identity as an adaptive tool in a multi-ethnic city. Those phenomena are rarely in evidence in contemporary arctic villages except those that are large enough to have heterogeneous populations such as Iqaluit and Kuujuaq.

However, I should emphasize the establishment of the new voluntary organization “Association of Montreal Inuit” in 2000. As this association provides urban Inuit with a monthly country food feast and other programs in Montreal, it may contribute to an individual’s sense of being an Inuk and having that cultural identity. I argue that their success depends on whether or not the association can maintain some socio-cultural practices of Inuit ways in Montreal.⁴

COMPARISON

Inuit are recognized as an indigenous people of Canada by the 1982 constitution. Also, their indigenous rights have been defined in the land claim agreements. Thus, it seems to be that as long as these advantageous promises for the Inuit of Canada are fulfilled, the Inuit as an ethnic people within a nation state will not disappear. Unless there is legal change of Inuit status in Canada, Inuit ethnic identity will not disappear. In this paper, I show clear contrasts concerning cultural and ethnic identities between one arctic village (Akulivik) and a multi-ethnic city (Montreal).

In the arctic village, cultural identity is much more important than ethnic identity for Inuit daily life. Although cultural tradition has changed over time, it has furnished the Inuit with cultural values and behavioral orientations at a given time. In the late 1990s, the Nunavik Inuit have a distinctive tradition that is different from traditions of the past. Cultural identity is connected to being an Inuk who interacts with others in contemporary Inuit appropriate ways. This identity is reproduced through socio-cultural practices such as hunting, food sharing, and so on in the daily life in the village (Dorais 1997; Lanting 1999). As this identity is a basis for an Inuk to live in Inuit ways, it is not always related to being a member of the Inuit ethnic group.

In Montreal, the Inuit have difficulties sustaining their cultural identity primarily because they do not have the necessary opportunities to engage in activities in Inuit ways. Also, they interact with non-Inuit people in a multi-ethnic environment. Under these circumstances, cultural identity cannot always be a basis for a frame of reference for socio-cultural practices. Rather, ethnic identity will be much more important for urban Inuit living with other peoples.

Briggs states as follows:

Conceptually bounded cultures and ethnic identities can serve psychological and social purposes that undefined culture—cannot serve. Boundaries act as walls. When we are in doubt, a bounded world assures us that we belong somewhere; it helps us to explain our own behavioral preferences and ideas when they are called into question, and account for some of the differences—often troubling ones—that we notice between ourselves and others (Briggs 1997: 230).

Inuit do not always need socio-cultural practices in daily life in order to maintain ethnic identity. They only have to show that they are different in some ways from other non-Inuit peoples in Canada. In order to integrate the diversifying Inuit population and show their distinctiveness, they need ethnic symbols which Briggs calls “emblems” (Briggs 1997) such as Inuit dance, plays, hunting tradition, Inuktitut, etc. To urban Inuit as well as Inuit politicians in the political arena, ethnic identity and ethnic symbols are an important and adaptive tool in their life (Kishigami 1992).

CONCLUSION

Genesis and reproduction of Inuit ethnic identity are clearly linked to the Canadian government policies toward indigenous peoples, and ethno-politics in Canada. This was especially so in the 1970s in the case of Inuit who identified themselves as Inuit of Northern Quebec, Inuit of Northwest Territories, Canadian Inuit, or as indigenous people. A new identity was essentially created through the process of land claim negotiations with federal, provincial and territorial governments. The 1982 constitution defines Inuit as an indigenous people of Canada and their aboriginal rights are protected. Also, their rights and benefits are defined and pledged by land claims. As long as institutionalized approval as an ethnic group and economic and social benefits to them exist, the Inuit as an ethnic group, with a distinctive ethnic identity (and with its own symbols), will never disappear in Canada.

As time goes on, identity is becoming increasingly more complicated and diversified to the contemporary Inuit of Canada. To be an Inuk is not a necessary condition of being an ethnic Inuk. In the late 1990s, as I have explained, cultural identity is an important frame of reference for social interaction among Inuit, while ethnic identity is primarily the frame of reference in urban (or multi-cultural) settings and political arenas. The former is reproduced through socio-cultural practices in Inuit ways and the latter is maintained through interaction with others and use of ethnic symbols in multi-ethnic situations.

As assimilation proceeds in multi-ethnic settings, persons with multi-ethnic identities are emerging. Because most of the urban Inuit hardly maintain or reproduce cultural identity in urban settings without a community, special center for them or close ties to home communities, the number of Inuit who do not keep Inuit ways of life or language but have ethnic identity of the Inuit will increase in the cities. A similar trend will be seen in large arctic villages with large heterogeneous populations such as Iqaluit and Kuujjuaq where ways of life are becoming increasingly more diversified than ever before. I argue that cultural identity is a tool for an Inuk to interact with his fellow Inuit in daily life and that ethnic identity is an adaptive tool especially for urban Inuit and political Inuit to interact with non-Inuit in multi-ethnic society. These two concepts will be useful for us to explain gaps between Inuit life in the arctic villages and symbolic discourse in political arena or understand the differences between arctic and urban lives of Inuit in Canada.

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NOTES

- 1) It is true that urban Inuit who came down south as adults have an Inuit world view and idea of life. Although some aspects of cultural identity based on hunting, daily food sharing, languages, and social relations are impossible or difficult to maintain in Montreal, spiritual and psychological aspects of culture are still at work for most adult urban Inuit (Dorais 2000 personal communication). All of the Inuit both in the north and south have both cultural and ethnic identities. But most of the urban Inuit encounter serious difficulties in realizing cultural identity.
- 2) According to Dr. N. Dyck (personal communication 2001), Paine was one of the first persons who saw "ethnicity as the politics of culture" (Paine 1984: 212).
- 3) Regarding emergence and reinforcement of a pan-Yup'ik ethnicity, see Iutzi-Mitchell (1994) and Fienup-Riordan (2000: 166–167).
- 4) Anthropological studies on urban Yup'ik and Inupiaq emphasize the importance of "sharing" country food and "sharing" practices in maintaining their solidarity and identity (Fogel-Chance 1993:99, 101; Fienup-Riordan 2000: 116; Lee 2002).

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